

**"I Have Something to Tell You": The Importance of Articulation
of Acknowledgment and Admission and the Life Journey
A Meditation and Commentary on Psalm 32**

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Presented to the Faculty
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**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry**

**By
Joseph Baruch Sacks**

May 2010

@ 2010

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This professional project completed by

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has been presented to and accepted by the
faculty of Claremont School of Theology in
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ABSTRACT

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This project finds the growing neglect of Psalms, within the Jewish community for personal reflection, communal study or personal prayer in favor of other types of material: contemporary writers of various faiths for personal reflection and rabbinic literature for communal study chosen usually to begin discussion of a particular social issue. Psalms used in prayer are either glossed over or celebrated musically with little or no attention given to the psalm's meaning.

This thesis tries to show how Psalms served as the popular mental health readers of its day through study of one particular psalm, Psalm 32. This psalm posits that human beings grow and evolve through a three-stage process: one, awareness that one's personal anguish is not primarily medically-based (although one may exhibit physical symptoms) but emotionally- and spiritually-based; two, that one must undergo serious self-reflection that leads to verbal sharing with all appropriate others, including G!d (however understood); and three, that upon doing so, one not only feels an immediate sense of release and relief but starts to live more joyfully, a path that reaches an apex of sort in one's

ability to rejoin community and contribute to it by sharing one's journey and supporting others in theirs. This process is one that needs renewing throughout one's life journey, and the more one lives faithfully in response to this call, the more one can live with deep satisfaction and gratification for the gift of life.

This thesis serves as a "Meditation and Commentary" by letting the biblical text itself and the presumed psalmist (distinct from the author) speak of the psalmist's life. This meditation and commentary stick close to the text but try to focus on the spiritual moment and its implications even while remaining in conversation with biblical scholarship, classical and current.

The thesis will demonstrate the universal applicability of the psalmist's journey by making an analogy to two distinct groups of people: those discovering that they have an addiction and must struggle toward recovery, on the one hand, and those discovering that their sexual orientation or gender identity do not fit societal "norms" and struggle to come out to live more fully and joyfully.

Finally this project attempts to show that the process for an individual within a community may serve as an analogy to the process that communities within a society may need to undergo.

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Theodore Nathan Sacks
who took up the psalmist's journey
with dignity, warmth and grace
and became his name—
someone who embodies goodness
and continues giving.

His legacy shines among us.

Zichro baruch:

His memory endures—
a blessing.

Chapter 1: Introduction—The Need for

Extended Reflection on Psalm 32

My Connection to Psalm 32

When I grew up, my parents belonged to three synagogues: one Orthodox, out of respect for my fully observant grandparents; one Conservative, where my siblings and I received formal religious education and became *b'nei mitzvah* (religiously obligated adults); and one Reform, the local temple that my parents founded in order to keep and maintain a sense of Jewish community in our small city, Monroe, Michigan. (The other synagogues were located in Toledo, Ohio.)

Each year I would encounter Psalm 32 in the mahzor used by Toledo's Conservative synagogue.¹ It made a deep impression on me that Yom Kippur had its very own psalm. I knew, of course, that Shabbat (the Sabbath) had Psalm 92 as its very own. That Psalm was recited every Friday night (and, traditionally, on Saturday morning, a service our small Monroe community never held). I knew of no other holy day that could claim a psalm of its own (although I later found out that some communities did, in fact, use certain psalms for certain holy days). It seemed most appropriate that Yom Kippur, the holiest day apart from Shabbat, should be so honored. However, the psalm did not appear in the Reform movement's High Holy Day mahzor, nor did any other psalm substitute for it. Later on, too, I attended Conservative and Orthodox synagogues that used the Silverman mahzor. None recited this psalm.

¹ Morris Silverman, comp. and ed., *High Holiday Prayer Book*, Traditional ed. with transliteration (Bridgeport, CT: Prayer Book Press, 1986 [1939]), 39. A mahzor is a cycle of prayers for an important holy day period, often used specifically for the High Holy Days, and so I use it here. The plural is mahzorim.

I tried to understand the reasons why anyone would omit a biblical passage, especially the one psalm associated with the holiest day of the year. Time could not be the only factor—the psalm is a mere short eleven verses. I did not fully understand the psalm: The entire mahzor thrilled to the majestic but archaic and style of English that reminded me of Shakespeare, but which I knew was surely holier for me as a Jew. Nonetheless, I did not understand that English that hailed from a different sociocultural milieu than my own; I could not usually penetrate it. The Hebrew, although daunting for an American youngster, was yet easier for me to grasp—at least on a surface reading. Only later did I become more sophisticated in how to read such literary gems.

The psalm can yet be found in the Silverman machzor while even many Orthodox mahzorim no longer include it. It does not appear, for example, in the very popular *ArtScroll* edition, which claims in its very title to aim for “completeness.”² Even in the few mahzorim that do retain the psalm, I suspect that millions of Jews have flipped over it as some other page has been called out by the service leader. But I find myself returning to this psalm over the years, reading and rereading it, studying it, and reflecting upon it. I grew to appreciate this psalm more, the more I entered into its rhetorical and linguistic world. The psalm may be some 2,500 years old, but I find it as fresh today as I imagine it was when it was first heard or read—challenging and compelling, nuanced and

² See Nosson Scherman, trans. and commentator, *Mahazor Zikhron Re’uven* [Mahzor in Reuben’s Memory]: *The Complete ArtScroll Machzor; Rosh Hashanah; A New Translation and Anthologized Commentary*, Nusach Ashkenaz, Nusach Ashkenaz (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985); and *Mahazor Zikhron Yosef* [Mahzor in Joseph’s Memory]: *The Complete ArtScroll Machzor; Yom Kippur; A New Translation and Anthologized Commentary*. Nusach Ashkenaz. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1986.

wise, personal for its author yet eternally relevant.

This Paper—Why and What

In the Jewish community the book of Psalms has become a forgotten resource. I recently taught a workshop for the Southern California Board of Rabbis entitled “Hope and Healing: The Psalms of the High Holy Days Liturgy.” I began by asking how many biblical psalms were incorporated into the High Holy Day liturgy. For inclusion, the prayer book had to include at least three consecutive verses. Beyond Psalm 27, designated as the psalm for the entire High Holy Day season wherein it is recited twice daily, the forty colleagues attending the workshop could not with certainty name one other psalm. I then distributed my list of fifty-six such psalms, which I garnered by surveying some twenty-two mahzorim and other High Holy Day worship material.

If modern rabbis themselves do not know of the existence of psalms in their own worship resources, it is clear that Psalms have become neglected. This observation resonates with my experience. That some editors gathered 150 poems in a book of Psalms, giving them lofty canonical status speaks of their tremendous literary artistry, liturgical potential and emotional depth. That they have fallen into desuetude is no small matter.

We can understand this partially when we understand that the use of the psalms, outside of Psalm 27, is merely customary and not required. In the modern service, the tendency has been to shorten, not lengthen services. One principle used to shorten services is to eliminate nonessential elements.

Second, the translation of psalms has not helped moderns to experience

their artistry or power. In a previous generation the use of rather stilted archaic English gave a sense of majesty that left the reader feeling distant from the psalmist's experience. The worshiper could not easily understand the relevance of the psalm to the modern life experience or the moment of the occasion, in this case the High Holy Day period, for which the psalm was selected for use.

Third, a previous generation of prayer books contained virtually no notes of any kind to assist the worshiper. Without such notes, not only could the worshiper gain no sense of the psalm's power or relevance but could not be assisted to appreciate its artistry. Today prayer books generally do provide some explanatory and devotional notes, but they remain too brief to do much more than whet the reader's appetite for further reflection, study and conversation.

Fourth, Bible scholarship in the past often remained inaccessible to or unknown by Rabbis. Biblical scholarship may have been discussed in general but articles in expensive scholarly journals could be accessed only by a few.

Fifth, biblical scholarship of the past often tried to uncover the history of the text, perhaps with a focus on a theoretical urtext. It remained irrelevant to the worshiper who had only the received text in the prayer book.

Sixth, the reflection that finds its way into the pews via sermons often is utilized to serve a narrow political (how a passage supports or does not support a specific cause) or theological view (how a passage supports the interest of the faith community of the speaker against all other interests). In this endeavor, other possible readings are railed against or remain unacknowledged, and all those who do not subscribe to the view of the status quo remain left out. Rarely does

one start with a view to hear how Scripture speaks to universal human experience, not narrow partisan interest. From this perspective, Scripture remains a barely tapped resource, even for those who actually read it.

Seventh, contemporary biblical scholarship has much to contribute to discussions of spirituality, personal growth and the social weal. However, most commentaries on the book of Psalms do not allow for much more than several pages on any one psalm. Articles on individual psalms remain in scholarly journals not usually accessed by the public, including clergy. Full length monographs on individual psalms could serve an important function for both the biblical scholar and the public, but are rarely written. A gap remains to be filled.

All this helps explain why so many prayer books no longer include, for example, Psalm 32, even though it traditionally held an important place and function for the High Holy Day experience. All this further helps explain why so many Rabbis skip over such material even when it still remains in the *machzor*.

This thesis will serve to attempt to address this issue by demonstrating, through a close reading of Psalm 32, how the experience of the psalmist, as expressed in a specific literary piece, still resonates for the modern worshiper in general and can once again help enhance the experience of the Jewish worshiper during the High Holy Day season. It can because the psalmist's journey is the experience and journey of every person. We each have a human need for expression, particularly of the areas of which we remain uncomfortable with ourselves, the places inside that bring up our sense of insecurity and even shame. The psalmist's journey encourages us to take up our own journey,

because it demonstrates that each person comes out on the other side a more well-defined and self-actualized person. The glory of our humanity resides in our ability and willingness to push ourselves toward emotional and spiritual growth. The challenge of remaining true to our journey is considerable. The psalmist's journey testifies to this truth. The psalmist has gone off course. Traditionally readers have thought this due to some wrong deed or "sin" that the psalmist is thought to have committed.³ Some people sometimes commit deeds for which expiation is difficult to achieve. Others take on more guilt than is appropriate for one's deeds. In either of these cases, the person may journey in an unhealthful way or otherwise fall into a stasis. The example I adduce is that of the addict.

For others still, the continuum of guilty or not guilty lacks relevancy. They feel such shame about themselves that sometimes even functioning becomes difficult.

In addition to traditional reading, I submit that the psalmist's going off course may not be related to some "wrongful" deed. Rather, many people find it difficult to share their truth not because they have done something wrong but, rather, because they feel shame for who they are. Such persons tend to feel not only that those around them *will not* be supportive but that those people *should not* be supportive. The example I adduce is that of the GLBT person struggling to come out in an environment that demeans any non-normative form or expression of sexual identity or gender identity, even though it is that person's truth, their normalcy, the manner in which their Divine Image inside them can be

³ I qualify the word "sin" with quotation marks in accordance with my remarks on language. See "Preliminary Note on Language" below, especially 8-10.

made manifest.

I attempt to bring together modern biblical criticism, traditional Jewish wisdom, and my own reflection. This commentary will remain in close contact, then, with biblical scholarship but its focus will be to locate the intersection of human experience, the spiritual moment and biblical inquiry at every stage to demonstrate how a psalm can serve not merely as a literary artifact but also why a psalm entered the spiritual curriculum of a people by evoking universal human experience and thereby evincing its ongoing potential for the life of the individual and the community. This paper thus represents both my personal meditation and my commentary on Psalm 32. It thus brings together my pursuit of scholarship and my life experience. I hope the reader finds her or his own personal connection to this classic statement of redemption through disclosure to someone or Someone. Who knows? Perhaps some day, somewhere, someone will re-instate a reading of this Psalm, and perhaps another child somewhere will feel moved by its cadences, its movement, its content and its challenge, to probe more deeply into the connection between this psalm and their own soul.

This Paper's Organization

This paper conforms to the norms of commentary. Following this introduction, I offer my original translation of Psalm 32 which, along with the Masoretic text, will serve as the basis for all the ensuing discussion. Chapter 2 explores the Psalm as a whole, its history, type, and structure, with a view to how type and structure contribute to meaning. Chapter 3 elucidates vv. 1-2, which speaks of the journey from becoming aware of the human need to acknowledge

and make admission to the power of receiving affirmation or forgiveness given from the vantage point of a particular person—the psalmist—who has undergone that journey. Chapter 4 discusses vv. 3-7, the three stages needed to take that human journey. The first stage (vv. 3-4) involves the growing anguish one experiences until becoming aware of and, at least internally, acknowledging the psycho-spiritual problem. The second stage (v. 5) entails everything involved in making a verbal admission. In the final stage (vv. 6-7) the psalmist rejoins the community from a healthier and more gladsome perspective. The entire passage then constitutes the core of the psalm and delineates these stages. Chapter 5 demonstrates the psalmist, who has taken in an important life lesson, as life-coach. The psalmist encourages others to take up their own parallel journey (vv. 8-10) and then closes with a final, rousing motivational chant inviting all members to take this up presently, so that everyone in the community can mutually support one another on his or her way (v. 11). Chapter 6 shows how the psalmist's journey remains a blueprint for all of us by analogy to two distinct persons as mentioned above: the addict struggling towards recovery and the GLBT person struggling to come out. In the final chapter, I broaden the individual journey against the background of both community and society.

A Preliminary Note on Language

Elliot Dorff reminds us that English is a language that was begun and developed by Christians.⁴ Throughout history Christians comprised the majority of those spoke it. Even today it the majority of those claiming English as their

⁴ See Elliot N. Dorff, *Knowing God: Jewish Journeys to the Unknowable* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), 175.

first language were probably born Christian. It should not surprise us then to state that English words, particularly in the realm of religion, have accrued connotations from Christian religious culture, whether or not the speaker claims Christianity as their personal religious faith or not. The words do retain those nuances.

Psalm 32 was not written as a "Christian" psalm or a "Jewish" one; it is Israelite. Israelite religious culture gave birth to both great religions much later than this psalm's writing. The psalm itself explores personal spirituality and how that spirituality is forged more responsibly and more deeply in relationship with God. By extension it teaches how we can grow in our relationships with others. As such the psalm's themes comprise such matters as "sin," "repentance," and "confession." These words have accrued Christian-specific meaning.

Let us consider the word "confession" as an example of the problem, since this word has been employed by virtually every commentator to understand this psalm. While its etymology may indicate some equivalence to the word "admission," four of nine dictionary definitions involve an experience with or of the priest.⁵ The dictionary adds that its "original religious sense of one who avows his religion in spite of persecution but does not suffer martyrdom (cf. Edward the Confessor, canonized 1161)."⁶ For many English speakers today, the experience of confession to a priest is foreign, even for many Christians. Further,

⁵ Dictionary.com Unabridged, s.v. "confess," <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/confess>, based on the Random House Dictionary: Random House, 2009 (accessed September 7, 2009).

⁶ Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "confess," <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/confess>, Douglas Harper: 2001 (accessed September 7, 2009).

the psalmist is almost surely not speaking in Psalm 32 of suffering due to persecution by others based on the psalmist's personal religious beliefs. Clearly, non-Christian speakers do not intend any such nuance; yet, it is difficult for Christians not to hear the word without any such resonance.

In addition, as I argue below, the idea of confession for many people refers to the admitting that one did something that they should not have done, or should have done differently.⁷ Similarly many add the corollary, namely, that someone did not do something that they should have indeed done. I understand the Psalmist here as indicating not necessarily or primarily a wrongful statement, action, or incident but how the entire mass of feelings we carry regarding any such acts becomes a huge spiritual problem when these are not attended to quickly and with due understanding of the depth of hurt one may have caused to another and to oneself. Going further, what one may have to share is not necessarily something "bad" or "wrong." It may, from an outsider's point of view, be neutral or even positive. Nonetheless, with some people it may feel difficult to share such information, often because one expects that the person with whom one wishes to share will react in an unsupportive manner. Let us take a concrete example. Someone meets and dates the person of their dreams and after a period of dating, they become engaged. Naturally one would wish to share this with family. However, one may feel that sharing the news may be difficult because the person they are engaged to is of a different religion, color, ethnicity, cultural heritage, economic background, political party, or be of the same gender. The social, cultural and/or religious setting of one's family members, not to

⁷ See below, 43-44.

mention their actual psychological and/or spiritual health may prevent them from fully sharing in their family member's joy. Knowing that a parent, grandparent, sibling or other family member may "disapprove" does not mean that the person has done anything wrong but may lead to the person's decision to refrain from, avoid, or postpone such sharing. Such a person may experience a tremendous amount of shame. It is my contention that such a stance of shame, prejudgment of others, and the avoidance of having the necessary conversation one needs—and wants—to have with important people in one's life about such significant matters more accurately reflects the psalmist's assessment of the "wrong" path taken in Psalm 32, for which the psalmist eventually offers acknowledgment. Moreover, one can experience anguish and shame, including perhaps guilt, when one does not share such heavy concerns with the appropriate and important persons in one's life.

Because of all this, I refrain from using language that I feel hinders the reader from the complete re-examination of this psalm that might help us with our own spiritual journeying. Instead of "confess" I use "acknowledge" or "admit" or both, but always in the context of the greater complex of spiritual issues than particular incidents can and perhaps should elicit. I use terms other than "sin" (and its traditional synonyms "transgression" and "corruption," always intending something like "wayward journeying," that is, going "away" from who one is and what one has discovered as one's life-path. Similarly, I utilize various terms for "repentance," such as re-tracking. My rethinking of terminology is crucial not only for religious reasons but to better elucidate what approach to this psalm finds.

Further, I have tried to avoid “linguistic sexism,” where one contributes, intentionally or not, to the invisibility or marginalization of women by using language that does not include women’s experience or privileges men’s experience over that of women. If one uses male-oriented language with regard to the Deity, then one suggests that the Deity is male. If so, then it follows that anything male that we recognize in our world is godly. By implication anything that is not male, which would include everything female, is not. When one uses male-oriented language to refer to human experience, one creates or imagines a world wherein women do not exist or exist only to support the “norm,” envisioned as men. The Hebrew Bible does contain both male and female imagery of the Deity.⁸ However, it generally offers an androcentric presentation of and vision of the world. Intended or not, such language supports the historical hierarchization of men over women on all levels within most cultures and societies and offers no path toward a world wherein all persons participate equally. So I eschew the use of gender specific language in reference to the Deity and to persons, whether in the body of this thesis or when translating others’ works.⁹ Even when citing other works and translations, I will amend gender-specific language to one that is gender-inclusive. I only use gender-specific language when the context requires it.

Finally, I need to advise about my spelling of one name for the Deity, that of

⁸ For female imagery of the Deity in the Hebrew Bible and Christian Scriptures, see Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of Gods as Female*, Rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994).

⁹ All translations of Biblical and rabbinic texts throughout this paper are my own, unless specifically stated.

G!d. G!d surely has been understood in multiplex ways. For some G!d is transcendent; for others, immanent; for others, both; for others, something different altogether. However one understands or interprets G!d or the idea of G!d, I use an admittedly idiosyncratic spelling for several reasons. The first is that in Jewish tradition, one does not spell out any of the seven holy names of G!d.

While from a strict standpoint this applies only to those names in Hebrew, G!d is the most potent term in English and many Jewish communities and many Jews have refrained from spelling it out. This lack of spelling out G!d's name heightens a sense that we can never fully or truly know G!d. If naming a concept, as Adam does to the animals,¹⁰ suggests understanding of it, then we can never really name G!d. My use of the exclamation mark is that G!d is always meant, understood and experienced as Something That Matters, Something Amazing, if always a Mystery. By using the exclamation point, we might do what the use of the exclamation point does, get us to stop, to think and to recover our sense of astonishment with G!d and about life.¹¹

My Admission Matters—Translation of Psalm 32

1 *L'David*.¹²
A Life Lesson.¹³

Evolving¹⁴ are those whose defiance¹⁵ is lifted,¹⁶

¹⁰ Gn 2:18-20.

¹¹ This practice comes from dialogue with long-time colleague and close friend Rabbi H. Rafael Goldstein.

¹² Meaning uncertain. See below, 22.

¹³ Delitzsch (see below, 12, n. 10) understands the root as meaning "to meditate." I understand this term, then, as indicating "the fruit of considered meditation and appropriate reflection," that is, a "life-lesson." See discussion below, 22-27.

¹⁴ The root means "to go, to advance." Hirsch (see below, 31, fn. 33-34) renders this root as "to progress." See discussion below, 27-36.

¹⁵ The root intends not merely an act but a mind-set. Hence "defiance" renders this term more precisely than "rebellion." See below, 38-39 and 47.

- whose straying¹⁷ gets re-tracked.¹⁸
- 2 Evolving are those whom YHVH accounts no distortion,¹⁹
and in whom one's life-spirit²⁰ contains no deceit....²¹
- 3 When I kept silent, my bones atrophied²² while I grumbled,²³ continually.
- 4 Continuously Your Hand weighed on me:
My vital fluids²⁴ dried up²⁵ by the summer's torridity²⁶....
- 5 My straying I acknowledge to You, and my distortedness I know longer hide.²⁷
I hereby declare:
- I admit my defiances²⁸ to YHVH;
You lift the distortedness of my straying....
- 6 Therefore, let the kindness-seeking²⁹ examine their lives³⁰ before You—
at the very moment of discovering their essential self.³¹
Truly,³² the menacing,³³ mighty³⁴ waters³⁵ will not reach them.
- 7 You are concealment, for me.
From narrow straits You release me.
You envelop³⁶ me in euphoric refrains³⁷ of rescue....

¹⁶ Or "carried," that is, "carried away." See below, 40-41 and 47.

¹⁷ The root means "to miss" in relation to a target or goal. Hence it indicates "deviating," "straying" or "veering." See below, 39 and 48.

¹⁸ Literally "covered." See below, 45 and 48.

¹⁹ From the root "to twist, to bend," something twisted or bent is a "distortion." See below, 39-40.

²⁰ More precise than the generic "spirit." See below, 51-54.

²¹ I have represented the Hebrew *selah* with an ellipsis since it seems to indicate a stanza break, perhaps with musical interlude, and is thus not a part of the text proper. See below, 59.

²² Literally, "became old and worn out." Bones "atrophy."

²³ The Hebrew represents articulate and/or inarticulate sounds. See discussion below, 69-71.

²⁴ Or "lifeblood." The root *l-sh-d* means "to suck, to lick," so the noun indicates "moisture." Here it intends the "moisture" needed to keep one alive and functioning. See below, 72-74.

²⁵ Literally, "turned" into or "changed." The "change" due to heat exposure is "drying up."

²⁶ The singular term renders a plural noun.

²⁷ Or, more literally, "cover up, conceal." See below, 89-90.

²⁸ Many translators use the singular for smoother English. Yet this misleads, as would the phrase "acts of defiance," since the Hebrew connotes more than mere acts. See below, 96.

²⁹ Literally, "one who exemplifies (loving) kindness."

³⁰ A reflexive form, "to examine oneself" is more temperate than "to judge oneself." See below, 136-7.

³¹ Literally, "at the time of finding/discovering." See discussion below, 138-42.

³² Taking *rak* as emphatic. See below, 142-3.

³³ The root of *shetef* means "to overflow."

³⁴ *Rav* can indicate "strength." See below, 143-4.

³⁵ *Mayim* evinces a plural construction. The English plural adds to the sense of "menacing."

³⁶ More precise, perhaps, than "surround."

³⁷ Or "ringing cries."

- 8 I share my example³⁸ and offer my lesson³⁹
 so that you can walk on your⁴⁰ path.⁴¹
 I will not close⁴² an⁴³ eye to your life.⁴⁴
- 9 So do not be like a horse or mule, senseless and static—⁴⁵
 which must be curbed with bit and bridle—otherwise,⁴⁶ not nearing you.⁴⁷
- 10 Mighty are the sorrows of the wayward,⁴⁸
 but those who trust in YHVH—
 loving kindness envelops them.
- 11 Revel⁴⁹ in YHVH—
 and exult,⁵⁰ you exemplary ones,⁵¹
 and jump in joy,⁵²
 you agreeable in heart.

³⁸ The verbal form of *maskil*, a "life lesson" (v. 1). See below, 157.

³⁹ From the same root as Torah, "Instruction." See below, 157.

⁴⁰ Literally, "this."

⁴¹ Meaning "life-path."

⁴² Reading *i-atza* as two words, with the verb from the root *atsah*, "to close, to shut," preceded by a negative particle. See discussion below, 164-9.

⁴³ Literally, "my."

⁴⁴ Literally, "to you."

⁴⁵ Rendered contextually, the phrase *ein havin* literally means "not understanding."

⁴⁶ Implied.

⁴⁷ See below, 171-3.

⁴⁸ The traditional "wicked" is far too judgmental. See below, 174.

⁴⁹ Or "rejoice."

⁵⁰ The Hebrew *gilu* is synonymous with *simchu*.

⁵¹ The Hebrew intends many more people than the traditional "righteous" allows. Indeed, I contend that it means, at least potentially, all people. See below, 199-200.

⁵² *Hif'il* form of the root, related to the noun "euphoric refrains" in v. 7.

Chapter 2: Explaining the Psalm as a Whole:

Mechanics Contribute to Meaning

Importance of Psalm 32

The Christian use of this psalm comes early: Paul quotes this psalm in Rom 4:7-8. It apparently was a favorite psalm of Augustine¹ and, later, Martin Luther.² Indeed, McCann³ reports the tradition that Augustine had the words of Psalm 32 inscribed above his bed so that every morning he would awaken to them.

Christians consider the psalm as the second of seven *Penitential Psalms* or *Psalms of Confession*. This grouping includes Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130 and 143,⁴ which are specially expressive of sorrow for wrongdoing. We know of this designation for this grouping of psalms from *Exposito Psalmorum* (Exposition of the Psalms), the sixth century (or earlier) commentary of Cassiodorus.⁵ Four of these psalms were known as “penitential psalms” by St. Augustine in the early 400’s. The appellation itself belonged originally to Psalm 51 (*Miserere*).

Holladay avers that traditionally the choir at a baptism sings the entirety of this Psalm after the child undergoes baptism.⁶ In the Greek Church, priests recite this psalm for personal purification before conferring baptism.

In Jewish tradition, the Vilna Ga’on⁷ assigned this psalm to Yom Kippur, a

¹ St. Augustine of Hippo, 354-430, was a Berber philosopher and theologian, a Church father who remains a seminal figure in the development of Western Christianity.

² Martin Luther, 1483-1546, initiated the Protestant Reformation.

³ J. Clinton McCann Jr., “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 807.

⁴ In the Septuagint numbering, Pss 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142.

⁵ Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator, c. 485-c. 585.

⁶ William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 181.

⁷ A common appellation for Rabbi Elijah ben Zalman, 1720-1797, also known as Elijah of Vilna or by his Hebrew acronym, the **Gra**, which stands for Ha-Ga’on Rabbi Eliyahu, Talmudist, Halachist, Kabbalist and foremost leader of non-Hasidic Jewish communities.

practice followed by the Silverman mahzor. Another Ashkenazic custom designates its reading for Shabbat Shuvah. Some groups of Ashkenazim read this psalm every Monday night as well.⁸

Psalm Type

While Christian tradition accounts this psalm as the second of the seven penitential psalms, the psalm itself is clearly not an example of penitential *prayer*. Rather, the psalm as a whole could be seen as commending, by way of a lesson, the incorporation of penitential *practice* into one's spiritual discipline.⁹ Not surprisingly, then, some modern commentators consider Psalm 32 a wisdom psalm.¹⁰ At least one longstanding Jewish tradition apparently agrees with the former.¹¹ The psalm clearly shares wisdom language and forms of expression. These include: the term *ashrei*, vv. 1-2; the expressions "share my example," "offer my lesson," and "life-path," v. 8; a contrast between wayward and exemplary persons, v. 10; and advantages of godliness, *passim*). The psalm also encourages the practice of *teshuvah*, "return, rectification." This term is understood by Jewish tradition as a full process of self-reflection leading to greater self-awareness and personal growth, which includes and incorporates admission before G'd and to anyone one has personally hurt in some way and asking G'd and any hurt person or persons for forgiveness, making whatever

⁸ Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Psalms," in *HarperCollins Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays. Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000), 406.

⁹ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 145.

¹⁰ See, for example, Franz Delitzsch, *Psalms*, vol. 5 of *Commentary on the Old Testament*, ed. Carl Friedrich and Franz Delitzsch, trans. Francis Bolton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866-91; reprint, updated ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 251; Martin S. Rozenberg and Bernard M. Zlotowitz, *The Book of Psalms: A New Translation and Commentary* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), 181.

¹¹ See B. Talmud. *Pesachim* 117a.

restitution is reasonable and possible, receiving forgiveness, forswearing the behavior that led to the hurt and subsequent distancing in the relationship and, finally, never repeating that behavior in any future analogous situation. Here, I propose that we best view admission to others not only in the context of some perceived wrong, but more importantly, the sharing of each person's important "truth" so that one can be in "right relationship" with G'd and the important people who inhabit one's life. One, then, evinces wisdom by acknowledging who one is, sharing one's deepest concerns or feelings or admitting what one has done to the appropriate persons and G'd and embracing change and personal growth. Of course, this fuller type of process may not have been envisioned by the psalmist. However, I sense that some more modest form of *teshuvah* was so envisioned. Perhaps the psalmist here has in mind the type formulated in Prv 28:13:

M'chase f'sh'av lo yats-li-ach; **u-mode** v'ozev y'rucham.
Those who cover up their defiance will not succeed;
 those who **make admission** and forsake it will obtain mercy."

This verse contains only seven Hebrew words, but three of them, in boldface,¹² are crucial to our psalm: *cover*, *defiance* and *confess*, as we shall explore.

In spite of all this, the designation "wisdom" cannot be rendered easily. The psalmist's posture on receiving Divine forgiveness does seem one of gratefulness. Hence, more commentators include Psalm 32 as a psalm of thanksgiving.¹³ Others take this as primarily a psalm of thanksgiving but one that

¹² I will use boldface to especially highlight important Hebrew terms and their translation throughout this thesis.

¹³ These include Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, 2 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 2:35-39; Holladay, 123; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1-50* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 194; A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, Vol. 1: Introduction and Psalms 1-72, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Oliphants, 1972; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), 254; Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 1-72*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 164;

has been adapted “according to the wisdom tradition.”¹⁴ Gunkel equivocates, assessing that “Psalm 32 offers a very odd amalgam of Thanksgiving Song and Wisdom Poem.”¹⁵ Schaefer, too, considers this a “curious combination” of these two distinct genres.¹⁶

Others, too, merely note the various discrete elements that the Psalm contains, without ascribing it to a particular “type.”¹⁷ Along these lines, I find that the psalm does comprise the following: an admission of wrongdoing (v. 5, surprisingly rare among the psalms), psalm of thanksgiving (v. 10), and didactic material (*passim*). Alter classifies this psalm as a “confession in the perfect tense” without further explanation,¹⁸ apparently on the basis of the crucial v. 5 alone. Brueggemann views the Penitential Psalms, including Psalm 32, as examples of “psalms of disorientation” in which the people ask not for “redress but, rather, for renewal in their covenantal relationship” with Gld.¹⁹ As my discussion hopes to show, Gerstenberger may come closer to the mark, if not

Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*. 3rd ed rev. and exp. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 80; J. (John) Day, *Psalms*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992), 12, 45, 47; and Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part I with an Introduction to Cultic Poetry*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1988), 143.

¹⁴ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 265. This is followed by Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Vol. 5 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 270; Roland E. Murphy, *The Gift of the Psalms* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 86; and Klaus Seybold *Introducing the Psalms*, trans. R. Graeme Dunphy (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 99.

¹⁵ Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction*, trans. Thomas M. Horner, Facet Books. Biblical Series Vol. 19 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 38.

¹⁶ Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Berit Olam Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, A Michael Glazier Book, 2001), 79.

¹⁷ So, for example, Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 161.

¹⁸ Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 13.

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1982), 94-106, quoted in VanGemeren, 271.

precisely on target, in suggesting that the psalm “comes very close to being a homily on penitence,”²⁰ except that I suggest that this psalm offers not sermonics in the abstract but a “life-lesson.”²¹

All of this difficulty in classification of the psalm leads me to consider just how special this psalm is and how the experience of it may well be different for different people. However, I also sense that it is one that leads us to better understand the wisdom of both longstanding Jewish and Christian traditions in giving this psalm an exalted place.

Structure

Vv. 1-2: A Wisdom instruction introduces the psalm’s theme about the need to acknowledge and the power of forgiveness. This takes the form of two statements that each begin with the word *ashrei* and each of which contain two parts.²²

Vv. 3-7: The three stages of the Psalmist’s experience:

vv. 3-4: The Psalmist’s suffering and anguish before
acknowledgment

vv. 5: The Psalmist’s verbal admission to G!d

vv. 6-7: The Psalmist shares the joyful feeling attendant to Divine
forgiveness with the community, touching upon the
personal journey leading to confession and, even more so,
offering encouragement in the form of a lesson for others

²⁰ Gerstenberger, 143.

²¹ See my discussion of the technical term *maskil* below, 22-27.

²² On the import of the word *ashrei* see below, 27-36.

to take up such a journey in their own life

VV. 8-11: A Call to the Community in Two Parts:

- a) vv. 8-10: Wisdom instruction encourages everyone, even the most stubborn, to act so that they can live a life that is considered *ashrei*, and
- b) v. 11: A (liturgical) closing calls the community to rejoice.

Thus this psalm evinces three main sections. The middle section itself is further divided into three sections, each of which tells of a different stage of the psalmist's experience. The text concludes the psalmist's telling of each stage with the technical term *selah*.²³

The surrounding two sections each have two further sections. The opening section has two statements beginning with the term *ashrei* that together constitute the life-lesson that the psalmist offers. The concluding section consists of an encouragement to all to strive to merit the appellation *ashrei* through appropriation of the life-lesson, followed by a concluding call to rejoice.

²³ See below, 59.

Chapter 3: Looking Back on the Journey (Vv. 1-2): From Awareness to Admission to Forgiveness

L'David

I have chosen to leave this heading without translation, as it appears we do not know with certainty what this ascription signifies. Tradition, of course, understands the term as signifying Davidic authorship, but the Hebrew itself allows for other possibilities. Perhaps this psalm was written “for David,” that is, to honor David, perhaps as part of a collection or performance in David’s honor. Perhaps, too, it was “to David” in the sense of honoring his life experience, his wisdom, or in imitation of David’s reputed musical and/or compositional style. Whatever interpretation is offered for this ascription, it should not influence greatly one’s interpretation of the psalm itself.

Maskil/A Life Lesson

Psalm 32 is the first of thirteen psalms with this term in the heading. The others consist of Pss 42, 44, 45, 52-55, 74, 78, 88, 89 and 142. The word appears as well in Ps 47:8, but its meaning remains unclear. Alter states with certainty that the term signifies a type of song, but his assertion comes only with the citation of Am 5:11-13 in support of it:¹

Therefore, since you trampled on the poor and tributes of grain you took from them: Stone houses you have built, but you shall not settle in them; wine vineyards you have planted, but you shall not drink their output. For I have experienced your mighty rebellions and your grand aberrations. You rivals of righteousness, you kickback collectors—and the poor, you public pervert their cause—Therefore the *maskil* at such a time is silenced, for it is an evil time.

¹ Alter, 110.

The word *maskil* does indeed appear there, but one could propose any number of possible meanings, almost any of which would seem to fit the context better than Alter's interpretation. Even if plausible, the logic remains difficult. His rendering would indicate that musical compositions, or art in general, are silenced at a time when the elite take advantage—and society ignores—the most vulnerable among us. However, one could argue that much of popular music plays rather loudly, rather than not at all, and that popular music diverts us from urgent needs around us. If Alter intends music or art that rages against the status quo, governmental abuse and/or social injustice, that, too, would not be correct. The folk music tradition, for one, began as and remains still a creative form and tool to challenge power. Bob Dylan's iconic album *The Times They Are A-Changin'* comes to mind as one powerful example of where art protested;² every song took on issues such as racism, poverty and social change. Indeed, its title track, one of Dylan's most famous, still represents the spirit of social unrest and political upheaval that define the 1960's.

The term *maskil* has some relation to the root *s-k-l*, the meaning of which the *BDB* acknowledges as "hard to classify" and so "scholars differ greatly."³ To me, however, the various *hif'il* formulations seem to share a base meaning of "to look at." While this might refer to a literal "looking at,"⁴ it more often connotes "looking at a matter closely," that is, "to ponder" or "to consider."⁵ It can also yield

² Bob Dylan, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*, studio recording, Columbia CL 2105, 1964. Rereleased, Sony B0009MAP9A, 2005.

³ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1906; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), 968. This is *s-k-l* I. The rare *s-k-l* II, "to lay crosswise," exists only in the *pi'el* (see Gn 48:14) and is irrelevant to this discussion.

⁴ Note Gn 3:6, *nech-mad ha-eitz l'haskil*, "the tree is delightful to look at."

⁵ See, for example, Dt 32:29; Is 44:18; Pss 41:2, 64:10, 101:2; Jb 34:27 and Neh 8:13.

a meaning of bearing the fruits of “looking.” With regard to deeds, it can thus mean “to act prudently,” “to act efficiently,” or “to act successfully.”⁶ These three may be one: “to act wisely or to act skillfully,” that is “to act after looking at something closely and considering it carefully.” Another way the root carries the meaning of bearing the fruits of “looking” is that by “looking” at something carefully, one can “gain comprehension, insight or wisdom.”⁷ It can also have the connotation of “causing others to look at carefully, consider closely or gain insight.”⁸

With this semantic range, one could choose to translate based on the meaning of “comprehension,” that is, “wisdom.” Thus one possible understanding could be a “didactic poem.” However, already Delitzsch trenchantly critiques this possibility, noting, for example, that only two of the thirteen psalms bearing this title could plausibly fit the proposed meaning, here and Psalm 78.⁹

Otherwise, translators could focus on the meaning of “capability” or “efficiency,” that is “skill.”¹⁰ Thus one might render this term as “a skillful psalm.” For support, one might point to 2 Chr 30:22, where the Levites “showed skill (*maskilim*) in the service of YHVH.” If “skill” is the intended meaning there, and that to me remains uncertain, we should still, have to wonder what type of skill is intended.¹¹ Would the skill be in the psalm’s composition, its content, the

⁶ For “to act prudently” see, for example, Am 5:13, Ps 2:10 and Prv 14:35. For “to act efficiently” see, for example, Prv 10:5, 17:2, and 19:14. For “to act successfully” see, for example, 1 Sm 18:14-15, 2 Kgs 18:7, Is 52:13, Jer 10:21, 20:11, 23:5, Prv 17:8.

⁷ See, for example, Ps 94:8, 119:99, Jb 34:35, Dn 1:4, 1:17, 9:25.

⁸ See, for example, Dn 9:22, Neh 9:20 and 1 Chr 28:19.

⁹ Delitzsch, 252.

¹⁰ See the discussion in C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 28.

these psalms are not “didactic poems”; that, however, does not mean that they do not convey important “life lessons.” It will be argued, of course, that other psalms may also offer such an important “life lesson.” I would counter that the “life lesson” of such psalms may not be the primary purpose of the psalm or the way the psalm functioned in the life of the community. These thirteen psalms, I propose, are offered with a specific view toward conveying an important “life-lesson” of the psalmist so that we might try to approximate, even appropriate, that wisdom into our own life’s journeys. This proposed meaning accords well with Delitzsch’s suggestion of “that which meditates,” hence “a devout meditation.”¹⁴ Delitzsch finds support in Ps 106:7.¹⁵

Our ancestors in Egypt did not **meditate** (**hiskilu**) on Your wonders; they did not remember Your acts of loving kindness but, rather, they rebelled at the Sea, the Red Sea.

*Midrash Tehillim*¹⁶ as well interprets through the phrase *nistakel l'ma'alah*, “looking upward” or “meditating on high/High.”¹⁷ The midrash may mean “taking time to seek Divine guidance” or “taking a step back to see the greater picture” but in either case, connotes deeper probing, scrutiny and exploration. One does not learn “life-lessons” by passing examinations; rather, they come through process, through pondering, through reflection on one’s experience, through “meditation.” Delitzsch’s proposal and the sense of the *midrash* accord well with my suggestion of “looking deeply,” whether inward (self-examination, reflection),

¹⁴ Delitzsch, 252.

¹⁵ See, as well, Ps 41:2 and Prv 16:20.

¹⁶ An aggadic midrash edited in the thirteenth century and containing material as early as the third, *Midrash Tehillim* is also known as *Aggadat Tehillim*, *Haggadat Tehillim* and *Shochei Tov*, the latter deriving from the opening words of Proverbs 11:27.

¹⁷ Solomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Tehillim Ha-M'khuneh Shochei Tov* [The Midrash on Psalms, known as ‘The Eager Seeker of Goodness’], [Facsimile of Vilna: ha-Almanah v'ha-Ahim Rom [The Widow and Brothers Rom], 5651 [1891] ed.] (Jerusalem: H. Vagshal, 1977), 121a-b.

officiating priest utilizing this psalm, the musical accompaniment, the playing of the musicians, the arrangement made for the musicians, or something within the worshiper's capability?

Even if the term has no or little relation to the idea of wisdom, it seems, in context, to presage, point to or represent a pun with the word *askil-cha* (*I will instruct you*) in v. 8 which derives from the same root.¹² On the other hand, perhaps the reverse is true, namely that the use of the root "instruct" in v. 8 may intend to pun on the term *maskil* in the heading. Either way, the use of the root in the opening section (vv. 1-2) and in the closing (vv. 8-11) section serves as an envelope highlighting the major block of material in the center, vv. 3-7. It thus seems to point to the type of experience which can give us the appellation of *ashrei*.¹³

Wisdom material connotes wisdom gained through life experience, not wisdom that one learns in a one-time classroom setting. Accordingly I have used "life lesson" to denote the kind of learning that the wisdom literature explores. This designation captures both the psalmist's growth at the time of sharing the personal experience as well as the potential for growth of the listener or reader.

We do well to note the difference between a "life lesson" and the forum in which the lesson is transmitted. The lack of the expected wisdom instruction in eleven of the thirteen psalms with the term *maskil* does indeed indicate that

¹¹ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 110.

¹² Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, "Psalms," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1316.

¹³ See below, 27-36.

these psalms are not “didactic poems”; that, however, does not mean that they do not convey important “life lessons.” It will be argued, of course, that other psalms may also offer such an important “life lesson.” I would counter that the “life lesson” of such psalms may not be the primary purpose of the psalm or the way the psalm functioned in the life of the community. These thirteen psalms, I propose, are offered with a specific view toward conveying an important “life-lesson” of the psalmist so that we might try to approximate, even appropriate, that wisdom in our own life’s journeys. This proposed meaning accords well with Delitzsch’s suggestion of “that which meditates,” hence “a devout meditation.”¹⁴ Delitzsch finds support in Ps 106:7:¹⁵

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¹⁴ Delitzsch, 252.

¹⁵ See, as well, Ps 41:2 and Prv 16:20.

¹⁶ An aggadic midrash edited in the thirteenth century and containing material as early as the third, *Midrash Tehillim* is also known as *Aggadat Tehillim*, *Haggadat Tehillim* and *Shochoer Tov*, the latter deriving from the opening words of Proverbs 11:27.

¹⁷ Solomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Tehillim Ha-M'khuneh Shochoer Tov* [The Midrash on Psalms, known as ‘The Eager Seeker of Goodness’], [Facsimile of Vilna: ha-Almanah v’ha-Ahim Rom [The Widow and Brothers Rom], 5651 [1891] ed.] (Jerusalem: H. Vagshal, 1977), 121a-b.

outward (life itself), upward (meditation, prayer) or some combination of these.

All the psalms that begin with *maskil* (except Psalms 44-45), interestingly enough, retain the inverted order “*L’David* (or another person), a *maskil*.” The psalm much more often employs the order that we find, for example, in the phrase *Mizmor l’david*. We might add that the term *maskil* always comes after the proper name, from which we can learn that a true “life lesson” always flows from actual experience.

Ashrei/Evolving people

Wisdom material in Tanakh employs the term *ashrei*, “evolving” with some regularity. In the book of Proverbs, where it occurs eight times, it has close links with the type of wisdom which leads to responsible and desirable conduct, the fruit of which includes long life, integrity and honor. Consider Prv 3:13 and 28:14, respectively:

Ashrei adam matsa choch-mah; v’adam yafik t’vunah.

Evolving is the person who finds wisdom;
and the person who gains insight.

Ashrei adam m’fached tamim umak-she libo yipol b’ra’ah.

Evolving is the ever-anxious person;
the hard-hearted one will fall into misfortune.

The term actually appears most often in Psalms, some twenty-six times (out of forty-five in Tanakh), where, it seems, it is usually employed to emphasize that a life that is considered *ashrei* is one that continually involves a personal relationship with G!d.¹⁸ From a Jewish spiritual perspective, one might note that the Divine Name YHVH, evinces a numerical equivalent of twenty-six. A life lived

¹⁸ Toni Craven and Walter Harrelson, “The Psalms,” in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 754.

in awareness of the Divine Presence, a life suffused with spiritual adventure is one that is indeed, highly evolved.

Elsewhere in Psalms *ashrei* is ascribed to people who actively do certain things or refrain from them, such as those who *hol'chim b'derech YHVH*, "those who walk on YHVH's path,"¹⁹ those who *y'rei HaShem*, "revere YHVH,"²⁰ or those who do not *halach ba-atsat r'sha'im*, "walk with the counsel of the wicked," and do not *amad b'derech chata'im*, "stand in the wicked's path."²¹

It does seem unusual that here the psalmist applies the term not to people who do or refrain from doing certain things but, rather, to those to whom something has happened.²² In this case they are specifically the recipients of forgiveness, which is an action that the injured party, in this case G'd, offers. The expression of forgiveness suggests a repair of, even reconciliation in, a ruptured relationship. Thus we can view this psalm as the exception that proves the rule, as the psalm wisely explains that while the final act of the granting of forgiveness may indeed come from *HaRachaman*, G'd's Compassionate Presence, nonetheless the bulk of action, both internal and external, must come from the person seeking forgiveness. This psalm does not focus on how hard it is to forgive; it focuses upon how hard it is to get to a place where one can seek and ask for forgiveness. Since the person who "receives" forgiveness is actually the one who has worked hard to set the ground upon which a true forgiveness might be granted, it remains appropriate to use the term *ashrei* for this person.

¹⁹ Ps 119:1.

²⁰ Ps 128:1.

²¹ Ps 1:1.

²² Davidson, 110.

Standard translations utilize “blessed” or “happy” to convey *ashrei*. Several problems remain with the use of “blessed.” First, the English carries a number of Christian-specific meanings the Hebrew in no way intends.²³ In the Roman Catholic Church, for example, “blessed” means “beatified.”²⁴ The verb can mean “to make the sign of the cross over or upon.” Second, other meanings of “blessed,” such as “sanctified,” “holy,” and “worthy of adoration or worship” have nothing to do with the Hebrew *ashrei*. Third, the use of “blessed” suggests to the reader that very little, if any, distinction could or should be drawn between *ashrei* and *baruch*. Even so, VanGemeran not only accepts the New International Version’s translation of *ashrei* as “blessed” but claims that “‘happy’ is a good rendition of ‘blessed.’”²⁵ Miller goes beyond even this, for he not only accepts the New Revised Standard Version’s translation of “happy,” but he defines “happy” as “seen and envied by others as blessed.”²⁶ But the perceptions of others’ perceptions do not inner happiness make. “Happy” and “blessed” are not really synonymous. Therefore, a translator should avoid causing confusion needlessly by using two English words which are clearly unrelated in English, even in meaning, interchangeably not only with each other but with two Hebrew words that are likewise unrelated.²⁷

The other standard rendition of *ashrei*, “happy,” also does not serve the Hebrew well. No nuance of “happy” can easily attach itself to any proposed root

²³ See “A Preliminary Note on Language” above, especially 8-10.

²⁴ Dictionary.com Unabridged, s.v. “blessed,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/blessed> (accessed September 17, 2009).

²⁵ VanGemeran, 53.

²⁶ Patrick D. Miller, “The Psalms,” in *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, et al, student ed., rev. and updated (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 735.

²⁷ See Holladay, 323.

of the Hebrew. “Happy” can convey various meanings, such as “characterized by good luck,” “enjoying pleasure,” “felicitous,” “willing” (as in “happy to help”) and “characterized by a spontaneous inclination to use something” (as in “trigger-happy”).²⁸ This is supported as well by the word’s etymology, from the Middle English for “luck” or “chance.” The dictionary lists “happy” with the adjectives “luck,” “fortunate,” and “providential” as synonyms that mean “attended by luck or good fortune.” All of these considerations suggest that being “happy” in English represents a more momentary, ephemeral phenomenon than the Hebrew connotes, and more fatuous and nugatory as well.

Related suggestions convey a sense that *ashrei* somehow may connote “How fortunate are” or “Congratulations are in order for” certain people. However, the use of “fortunate” might convey material reward. Indeed the English word comes from the Latin *fortunatus*, meaning “made prosperous.”²⁹ While a few citations, particularly in Proverbs might suggest that *ashrei* could sometimes encompass material blessing, most of the usages, as my discussion has showed, demonstrate that *ashrei* (most) often does not mean material reward, particularly in Psalms. For this reason I also reject the understanding of A.A. Anderson that the term connotes “how rewarding is the life of.”³⁰ One wonders if those who promote such an understanding may be conflating *ashar*, “to step” (with the initial letter *alef*, the root involved here) with *ashar*, “to become rich” (with the initial

²⁸ The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 4th ed., s.v. “happy,” Houghton Mifflin, 2009, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/happy> (accessed September 22, 2009).

²⁹ Dictionary.comUnabridged, s.v. “fortunate,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/fortunate> (accessed September 7, 2009).

³⁰ A. A. Anderson, 58.

letter *ayin*).

As to the notion of congratulations, in English one employs this term “to express joy or acknowledgement, as for the achievement or good fortune of another.”³¹ Indeed we usually offer these for reaching a milestone (such as a birthday) or achieving a goal (such as a graduation) or attaining a position (job promotion). This brief discussion demonstrates the inappropriateness of this term, as well, to convey the Hebrew.

Others suggest a possible derivation from *yashar*, “to be right, to be just.”³² The term, then, would convey that just behavior toward others results in a state of blessing. This latter possibility, however, seems implausible in our psalm where the psalmist distanced or wronged G!d or another human being. If the psalmist distanced or wronged the former only, then ethics are not involved. If the latter, the psalmist offers no hint that s/he has redressed the matter with the injured person/s. Rather, the psalmist only commends the power of acknowledgment and admission to G!d.

As to the root of the word itself, the derivation most likely comes from the verb *asher*, “to walk, to move, to go, to lead.” In proposing this etymology, Hirsch³³ points to the use of the verb in Prv 4:14 and 23:19.³⁴

B'orach r'sha'im al-tavo; v'al-t'**asher** b'derech ra'im.
On the road of the wayward do not enter;

³¹ Dictionary.comUnabridged, s.v. “congratulations,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/congratulations> (accessed August 4, 2009).

³² Jean-Pierre Prevost, *A Short Dictionary of the Psalms*, trans. Mary Misrahi (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 21.

³³ Samson Raphael Hirsch was a German rabbi, philosopher, and early opponent of the burgeoning Reform Movement, becoming the intellectual founder of school of neo-Orthodoxy.

³⁴ Rabbi Raphael Samson Hirsch, *The Psalms*, trans. Gertrude Hirschler, Corrected ed., Hirsch Publication Society (Jerusalem: Feldheim Publishers, 1991), 1.

and do not **stride** in the path of the froward.

V'asher ba-derech libecha.

And stride in the path of your heart.

Hirsch contends further that the base meaning of “to step” or “to step or stride forward,” can, from there, also mean “to progress.” The *BDB* suggests that this movement is “in the way of understanding.”³⁵ Hirsch further suggests that *ashrei* refers to the progression toward the eventual attainment of material and spiritual wealth, progress toward all that which is desirable. This, he offers, is the basic motive of all people, the goal of our thoughts and acts. In Psalms, at least, it seems to me that the procurement of material wealth is not a major factor; the attainment of spiritual richness is. *Ashrei* is applied, most especially in Psalms, to those who continually “advance” or “progress” in wisdom, spirituality, and emotional depth, that is, those who, through the ongoing discipline of meditation and self-reflection, “evolve.”

The root of *ashrei*, then, may signify more purposive movement than other roots with a similar connotation, such as *halach* (“to go”). In this case, the term *ashrei* would point to an essentially dynamic concept, a sense of someone who is always forging ahead in life, especially in one’s psycho-spiritual dimension. I have tried to demonstrate this sense of *ashrei* by use of the English word “evolving.” We cannot state that one has “evolved,” since as a dynamic concept, one evolves over time throughout one’s life. No specific destination is meant by the process, so that one can never state with full accuracy that one has “made it” as far as their personal growth potential is concerned: one grows throughout

³⁵ *BDB*, 80.

one's life.

It is also probable that the same root lies at the base of the name of the goddess Asherah. The *BDB* points to an Assyrian *ashirat*, meaning “gracious,” such that Asherah is “The (Most) Gracious One.”³⁶ However, if biblical root meaning of “to step” appertained, then Asherah may represent the “One Who Leads,” the “One Who Directs,” even the “One Who Mentors,” thereby encouraging and enabling Her worshipers to evolve in their lives.

It does seem that most often, although not always, *ashrei*, at least in the book of Psalms, does have to do with being in right relationship with the Holy One. With Hirsch, we might state that *ashrei* presents us with a consideration, and starts a conversation, of what makes authentic life and holy existence possible and desirable. That is, if *ashrei* points to our forging ahead in our personal lives, what is the goal against which we can measure whether or not we are on track and whether we are indeed moving forward in our lives? What really matters in life, specifically in our lives? For most everyone, life is most worthwhile because of the relationships we nurture and maintain, whether with a life partner, a parent, a sibling, other relative, friend, neighbor, classmate, coworker, or someone else.

The word *Ashrei*, in any event, inaugurates the entire book of Psalms, *Tehillim*. It feels as if someone wanted to ensure that this word, and all that it might connote, would serve as the gateway into the world of the psalms. To enter into this world, one must be searching for a life that “is striding forward,” “the (ever-)striving life,” the life of spiritual depth—in short, a life that continues to

³⁶ *BDB*, 83.

grow or “evolve.” Everyone may aspire to the ascription of a life that is *ashrei*, “evolving,” but no two people become *ashrei*, “evolve,” in the same way.

Further, since many, if not most, psalms were used, even intended, for liturgical use, we might extend the scope of this possible understanding to encompass the idea that prayer should be considered, and could yet be, an important component of learning life, of growing. Finally, if Psalms indeed represents a collection of *tehillim*, literally “praises,” we must consider the possibility that one aspect of our praise of G'd or of life itself is that we can and do grow and evolve over the course of our lives. This may be experienced, rightly, as a type of miracle: That we find ourselves able to drink more deeply and yet still more deeply from the cup of life, finding ourselves not merely compassionate, but deepening our capacity for compassion; not merely loving, but deepening our capacity for love; not merely just, but deepening our capacity for justice.

With this background, we must consider all uses of *ashrei* subsequent to Psalm 1 as forming an intertext with it and, therefore, as extending or interpreting the idea of what it means to grow or evolve. McCann aptly notes that by equating the “evolving” person, the one called *ashrei*, with the one who asks for and receives forgiveness, our psalm “functions as an important check against any tendency to misunderstand Psalm 1.”³⁷ Succinctly stated, McCann argues here that living a righteous life does not mean living a life that remains devoid of all problems and missteps along the way, but one that is marked by openness to

³⁷ McCann, 805, also notices a correlation between Psalm 1 and our psalm.

learning life's lessons, by willingness to allow oneself to be publicly vulnerable by openly acknowledging who one is, what concerns and dreams one bears, admitting one's wrongdoings, and one's willingness to embrace the forgiveness that is offered. Psalm 32 lays out this path.

The *Ashrei*-ness, the growth, for which the psalmist yearns and strives, is not a private, individual affair; rather, it understands that each human operates within larger contexts, with the community and people as a whole always in view. We see this in the psalm immediately following the very one we are studying, in Ps 33:12:

Ashrei is the nation whose G!d is YHVH;
the people whom G!d has chosen as a heritage.

We find the evocation of wider concern as well in the final verse of Psalm 144 (v. 15), which forms the second verse of the prayer, uttered thrice daily by observant Jews, called "the *Ashrei*".³⁸

Ashrei is the people who have it so;
Ashrei is the people for whom YHVH is G!d.

We also must note that the word *ashrei* seems to represent a plural form. Nonetheless, in this psalm it is clearly applied to a single individual. This may teach several lessons. First, such usage may intend to encompass each individual within the community. One grows and evolves, in great part, through relationship. One must consider relationship not merely with individuals in isolation but also with groups. The various communities within which we live out our lives are all entities with which we find ourselves in relationship. Second and more important, a person who is evolving will do so not in a specific moment and

³⁸ The prayer consists of Pss 84:5 and 144:15-145:21.

not at one single point in one's life but many times (if not "specific moments") and continuously throughout life, so that the appellation of *ashrei* is applied not merely to someone who did one specific deed; rather, it applies to everyone of us who strives to grow, to evolve, emotionally and spiritually, in life and throughout life.

Questions to ponder:

1. What does true "happiness" mean as you read this psalm? What does "happiness" mean to you personally? How does our modern American culture seem to understand happiness? How would you translate *ashrei*?

2. What are you striving for in your life? What really matters in life and, specifically, in your life? How do you know when you are on track?

Ashrei...lo avon/Evolving People...accounts no distortion

The psalm begins with a conclusion: The evolving person is one who is self-aware and acknowledges one's experience of life and thereby ultimately can feel deep joy. Deeper joy comes from opening ourselves up to vulnerability. This conclusion comes from at least some seminal occasion in the psalmist's life. We readers sense that the psalmist has undergone a psycho-spiritual transformation. One cannot be called *ashrei* until one has undertaken the task of one's own personal growth, until one has done some evolving. So the psalm begins realistically at some place ahead on one's journey, not at the beginning; realistically yet hopefully, perhaps gaining interest on the part of the psalmist's listeners and us readers who need to know that such matters can indeed end up positively. Thus the opening verses do not constitute some pious generalization

but, rather, sum up the testimony of the psalmist's personal experience.³⁹

The psalm does not then try to throw conventional pieties at us, urging us toward "the good life" and away from "temptation." Rather, the psalm assumes any and every life will encompass vulnerability, tentativeness and wrongdoing, even for the most exemplary. What the psalm does not, and cannot, assume is the hoped for restoration of relationship with G'd (or anyone else), the hoped for gift of receiving affirmation, or forgiveness, because the psalmist here does not explore the task of the One (or the one) who might grant such affirmation or forgiveness. Rather, the psalmist only knows what is possible for the one who seeks rectification or restoration: that such a possibility of restitution, restoration, or affirmation, or forgiveness, begins with an acknowledgment and admission of where one veered off of one's personal life path. Indeed, it is the need and the hope for such affirmation that compels the psalmist to eventually confront the self, acknowledge responsibility and, finally, articulate it.

Pesha...Chet...Avon/Defiance...Off Track...Distortion

In any shape or form, our modern culture does not easily hear the word "sin" and such synonyms as "transgression" or "corruption." Even many clergy avoid using them; so do I. Beyond any Christian-specific overtones,⁴⁰ their use can sound heavy, overbearing, and judgmental. Pleins helps us here by reminding us that all of the various words for wrongdoing that the Tanakh

³⁹ Herbert J. Levine, *Sing Unto God a New Song: A Contemporary Reading of the Psalms* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 97. See as well, Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg Old Testament Studies (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 96.

⁴⁰ See above, 8-10.

employs “denote a break in our relationship with G!d and other persons.”⁴¹ In this sense all such terms point to different ways or aspects of such a relationship difficulty. Thus every discussion of “sin” remains most relevant and vital, even while we search for different terminology. The Hebrew Bible, too, gropes for vocabulary. In these first two verses we find three of the most common terms used in Tanakh to indicate the human behavior of getting off one’s path.

pesha. *Pesha* means “rebellion.” It can be used for rebellions against the people who inhabit our lives. So, for example, Is 1:2 indicates its use for children who rebel against a parent. The metaphor there indicates rebellion against the ultimate Parent, where people, G!d’s *banim*, “children,” *pash’u vi*, “**rebelled**” *against Me*.

The Tanakh also employs this term for rebellions on a much larger scale. Thus in 2 Kgs 1:1 we find that Moav *vayif-she*, “**rebelled**,” against Israel. There Moav and Israel are treaty partners, but interestingly the rebellion is not described as one leader against another, but as one nation, society or culture against another. In context here, then, the term seems to indicate a breaking, loosening, or tearing away from G!d or “rebellion” against Divine authority. Using the idea of *ashrei* (v.1), Limburg infers that an evolving life is one no longer lived in rebellion against G!d and, we might add, against one’s own self.⁴² The idea of “rebellion” usually focuses upon a specific act, while the Hebrew *pesha* seems to focus often on the spiritually negative posture that accompanies such an act.

⁴¹ J. David Pleins, *The Psalms: Songs of Tragedy, Hope, and Justice*, Bible and Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 61.

⁴² James Limburg, *Psalms*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 103.

Therefore I have used “defiance” in my translation, as it could refer to the “act of defiance,” the “posture of defiance” or both. Take, for example, those who exhibit defiance against the idea of getting treatment for an addiction. This kind of defiance constitutes a not rebellion in the sense of a “plot,” but, rather, “defiance” against self, others and G!d that often encompasses a series of acts and manipulations, as well as postures and attitudes that can continue for years. In any event, the “defiance” is getting out of right relationship with G!d and others.

chet. *Chet* occurs thirty-four times in the book of psalms. Jgs 20:16 elucidates its meaning: The verse describes seven hundred left-handed soldiers from the tribe of Benjamin who could “sling a stone at a hair, and not **miss** (*yachati*).” The word, then, connotes a “missing” of some target or goal; a “deviation” from that which is pleasing to G!d; an “aberration” from taking the better course of action; a veering off the road or a “straying” from one’s life path. This type of veering off course may be committed with or without intention. Limburg (*ibid.*) infers that the evolving self, the person who is *ashrei*, is now back “on track” and heading in the right direction, on course, no longer “straying” or veering off course or misdirected.⁴³ When speaking of persons, “straying” or “veering” both carry less negative emotional import. A “deviant” is someone from whom we keep our distance; a “stray” we wish to assist.

avon. *Avon* conveys a sense of being “twisted,” “crooked” or “bent over.” Is 24:1 speaks of YHVH *twisting* the surface of the earth. Ps 38:6 depicts the psalmist as *bowed down* and prostrate. Thus *avon* connotes “distortion.”⁴⁴ While

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ The word also bears a secondary meaning, the “guilt” attached to such distortion or the “punishment” such distortion may bring. These secondary meanings are not at play in this psalm.

pesha constitutes a wrong always committed intentionally, an *avon* is done unintentionally or is due to human weakness.⁴⁵ Limburg infers that an evolving self, one called *ashrei*, now has a life that assumes proper form, one that is no longer “twisted” or “bent” out of shape.⁴⁶

N’sui...k’sui...lo yachshov/lifted...back on track...accounts no

These three terms of wrongfulness find their counterpart in three terms indicating forgiveness or the restoration of relationship, and often suggesting repair of self as well:

n’sui. The specific form of the verb *nasa* that we find here, *n’sui*, appears instead of the expected *n’su*. The latter finds attestation in Isa 33:24: *n’su avon*, “forgiven distortion.” I surmise that the text employs this variant purposefully in order to rhyme with *k’sui*.

Hirsch, however, proposes, without adducing evidence, that the form *n’sui* is actually a combination of two roots, *nun-shin-alef*, “to lift” and *nun-samech-heh*, “to test.”⁴⁷ He suggests that the psalmist wanted to get across the notion of just how tested we are in our struggle to “stay the course” in our lives but that we have enough moral energy to remain free from *pesha*. On the other hand, Hirsch also contends that we need Divine help to avoid *chet*, since he proposes that those are always unintentional departures from our life-path. One Greek text seems to understand the Hebrew from the root *nun-shin-alef* (= *nun-shin-heh*) meaning “to forget,” a root that is found in Jer 23:9.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz contend that B. Talmud, *Yoma* 36b suggests this. See Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, 183.

⁴⁶ Limburg, 103.

⁴⁷ Hirsch, 227.

Hirsch's idiosyncratic view has not received acceptance, for the well-attested root yields the basic meanings of "to lift (up)," "to carry, to bear" or "to take (away)."⁴⁹ Indeed, Clifford asserts that *nasa* really only means "to carry" but has two uses.⁵⁰ The first is "to carry (around) a burden," and hence some translations use "to bear," "to endure" or even "to suffer." The other use is "to carry away a burden," and hence some translations use "to lift up," "to take away," or even "to forgive." This idea that one's getting off of one's path can be seen as a tremendous burden one carries may be seen, for example, in Ps 38:5:

Ki avonotai av-ru roshi **k'masa** chaved yich-b'du mimeni.
For my twisted actions overcame me;
like a heavy **burden**, they overtake me.

From the perspective of the one who "carries around" such a burden, the experience of the burden being "carried away" is, in effect, the feeling that the burden is "lifted." Thus the difference between the meaning of *nasa* as "to lift," and its meaning of "to carry" or "to take" may be understood as one of perspective.

Excursus 1: Cain and Our Psalmist

Cain's brief statement resonates with the situation of our psalmist:⁵¹

Gadol avoni **mi-n'so**
Too great is my distortion **to carry**.

The Deity has just punished Cain for murdering his brother Abel, accompanied by strong words. Cain must now bear the full weight of his horrific

⁴⁸ *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, ed. Rudolf Kittel, Karl Elliger, and Wilhelm Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967-77), 1113.

⁴⁹ *BDB*, 669-671.

⁵⁰ Clifford, 165.

⁵¹ Gn 4:13.

act, including of course the full weight of Divine punishment but excluding, at the moment of this succinct yet very poignant statement, a sense of Divine mercy or compassion, let alone forgiveness. The Deity does relent and places a mark upon Cain so that no one will kill him as he killed Abel. Cain's burden is then "lifted" or "carried away."

We must take a moment to explore Cain's case before moving forward, as it speaks deeply to our psalmist. G!d's original punishment left Cain as open game for someone—anyone—to murder him. Cain himself realizes this. An explanation of this Divine commutation of any potential death sentence must, it would seem, find its source in these three words. First, G!d surely knew the consequence of the Divine punishment. The consequence that someone would murder Cain to "set right" Cain's murder of Abel is, after all, not vigilante justice but the proper judicial response, as embedded in the Covenant Code that the Deity personally delivers to the people through Moses at the grand, awesome encounter on Mount Sinai.⁵² There G!d announces the juridical principle of *ayin tachat ayin*, "an eye for an eye" explicitly.⁵³

Later legislation specifically encompasses Cain's case.⁵⁴ I cite from the opening and closing verses of that passage:⁵⁵

V'ish ki yake kaw!-nefesh adam mot yumat
The person who smites any person's being (to death)
shall surely be put to death.

u-make adam yumat

⁵² Ex 21-24.

⁵³ Ex 21:23-24.

⁵⁴ Lv 24:17-21.

⁵⁵ Lv 24:17, 21.

And the one who smites a person (to death) shall be put to death.

The exposition in Leviticus, then, contains a bracketing device. The idea that someone who kills another should receive death as the legal punishment surrounds the laying out of the general principle of “an eye for an eye.” G!d, in the case of Cain, does not follow the very law, then, that G!d delivers to the people on Mount Sinai. Cain’s sincere acknowledgement, although briefly stated, affected the Divine heart. Cain’s words demonstrated inner growth and an evolution in his spirituality that leads to a reestablishment of his relationship with G!d. Of course that relationship cannot be exactly the same as it was prior to the rupture: On the surface it may appear, at least at the moment, still strained. However, underneath that veneer, the relationship may be even better now: indeed, Cain’s brief communication allows, for the first time in a long time, a genuine relationship between the two.

A Hebrew adage asserts that “D’varim min halev nich-n’sim el halev,” “Words from the heart penetrate the heart.” In this case, Cain veered way off the path of who he could be. His words here are so on target and so earnest that they move the Divine Heart: G!d decides not to follow G!d’s own legal prescriptions. Something more important must be at stake. How great, then, the power of admission must be—it can help one to understand and articulate one’s inner spiritual dynamics; it can help one regain one’s footing one’s life-path; it can help restore relationship with G!d and persons, it can move hearts which might return the gift of forgiveness.

We do not consider enough that Cain’s statement becomes the first

recorded *vidui*, “admission,” something that lies at the heart of the Psalmist’s spiritual growth work here in Psalm 32. Traditionally *vidui* is rendered as “confession” in reference to some misdeed, but I understand it as personal acknowledgment or admission of something far deeper and more personal, a true disclosure of self, something that approaches a “revelation.”

The English word “confession” derives ultimately, from *fateri*, “to admit.”⁵⁶ However, the word resonates to some extent by its appropriation by the Church. In particular some churches, notably the Roman Catholic Church, classify confession as a sacrament in which repentant sinners individually or sometimes as a group privately confess their “sins” in front of a priest and receive absolution from the guilt of those “sins.” In addition, the idea of “confession,” not only in Christianity but also Judaism is popularly considered an apology of some sort for a specific act or series of acts, including of course the decision to not act when one could and should have done so.

As I reflect upon this Psalm, it seems to me that the Psalmist’s acknowledgment is not focused on affirming the commission of a specific act. It rather encompasses the whole journey of how such acts can negatively affect our spiritual core. That debilitation can indeed weaken our will and affect our soul. The physical distress of the psalmist (“my bones atrophied”)⁵⁷ is not the problem; it is a symptom of it, a clear manifestation of it. However, placing a bandage on the open sore will not help the inner wound to heal. We need to confront this deeper problem. The acknowledgment that Cain and our Psalmist

⁵⁶ See above, 9, n. 5 and 6.

⁵⁷ V. 3.

are able to offer demonstrate that they have so confronted themselves, started to address their individual spiritual issues, and evolved to the place where they can articulate their journey, including the original act or acts that gave rise to the inner spiritual crisis.

The acknowledgment does not only serve as a guidepost to the growth up to that point. The point of verbal articulation of one's reality also serves as a springboard toward even more and deeper spiritual growth. This is the heart of this psalm.

k'sui. The term *k'sui* means "covered." It signifies having a regretted action "concealed" or "covered"—with, perhaps, expiation—so that G'd no longer sees it, as it were. This perhaps means that G'd does not bring the matter up anymore. People who missed the mark or "strayed" from their life-path are now aiming better or have gotten back on the right path. In either case, it is no longer necessarily obvious to an outside observer that they at one time strayed, for they are now where they should be in their life journey and hence their past misstep is "hidden" from the observer's view. In getting back to one's path, one has to "cover" one's wrong tracks, one's "straying." This is only completed when one is "back on track." Thus I use "re-tracked" here.

lo yach-shov (avon). This verbal phrase means "does not account (distortion)." Perhaps the English "impute" or "compute" both together best capture the sense of the verb. These words derive from the Latin *putare*, "to assess," "to reckon," or "to think."⁵⁸ We might consider a tax debt that is settled

⁵⁸ Dictionary.comUnabridged, s.v. "impute" and "compute"
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/compute> and
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/impute> (accessed on August 4, 2009).

and, after time, is no longer part of one's record. Alternatively, we might think of a driving record. For many relatively minor offenses, one can go to driving school, pass a test, and no points are entered on one's record. Points that do enter the driver's record only remain on for a certain time period, set by each state. The psalmist here no longer has the action or actions that constituted the distortion on the formal Divine ledger of accounts. The psalmist no longer has points in the Department of Motor Vehicle's system.

The passive constructions here (e.g. *n'sui*, *k'sui*) highlight human passivity in the final act of forgiveness in contrast to G!d's active role. Paradoxically, however, the psalm then goes on to highlight human activity. Set against G!d's relative passivity, as it were, the psalm portrays the process that leads to the point where G!d can even consider restoring the relationship or bestowing of affirmation or forgiveness.

N'sui-pesha, k'sui chata'ah...lo yach-shov lo avon/

whose defiance is lifted, whose life is back on track...accounts no distortion

Stuhlmüller contends that this "vocabulary of sin and forgiveness" here "reminds one of Psalm 51."⁵⁹ That psalm certainly does employ the same words for bearing an inner burden, although it uses *hataf*, not *hata'ah* as we find here. However, the terms used for affirmation there are not at all similar. Psalm 51 employs the terms *machah*, "to erase" (vv. 3, 11); *kibes*, "to cleanse" (v. 4), *tiher*, "to purify" (v. 4), *hilbin*, "to whiten" (v. 9), and *haster panecha mi*, "to hide the Divine Face from" (v. 11). Further, the psalm does not utilize any of the terms of

⁵⁹ Stuhlmüller, 51.

affirmation found here.

In any event, it is important to understand that the perceived burden—and the consequences of carrying it—in all of these metaphors operates semantically not as an event, action or process but, rather, as an object.⁶⁰ Let's look more closely.

n'sui peshal/rebellious is lifted. As one continues to “carry” around that object, that poor choice of action or inaction, via the deep feelings of remorse, shame or guilt that one harbors, one may suffer ill effects. The object can, however, be *n'sui*, “carried away” by another. It then feels as if a weight no longer rests upon one's shoulders. One has been relieved of the encumbrance of the difficult and heavy load. In most cases in the Hebrew Bible, the Deity is the One who carries away the burden.⁶¹ Here, the elephant in the room of one's heart is the *peshal*, the “defiance” with which one is living out one's life. We all do not realize the many things and the many ways in which we do not follow through on our goals or to garner in what matters most to us. This “defiance” against our own essential selves is, at once, a rebellion against G!d, since it is the Image of G!d that animates our being.

Rozenberg and Zlotowitz hypothesize that the root *nasa* here intends an actual lifting of the head by the One/one judging, a ritual symbolic of affirmation or forgiveness.⁶² They point to Gn 40:20, “and he lifted the head of the cup bearer,” which, to me, lends perhaps plausibility but does not constitute proof since there, too, the restoration of the cup bearer to his position in Pharaoh's

⁶⁰ Clifford, 165.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, 183.

court may encompass a sense of forgiveness or reconciliation through the restoration of the official to rank as well as any ostensible royal or court rite of reinstatement that may or may not include such a literal act. The psalmist's admission in v. 5 may seem stylized but that does not suggest that it is part of an actual ritual. The metaphoric meaning must certainly be in place here, and it seems uncertain, if not doubtful, whether this term can convey both a highly metaphoric meaning and a highly ritualized one at the very same time.

k'sui chata'ah/whose life is back on track. In this second metaphor, the veering off on a wrong course becomes an "object" that G!d "sees" and does not like. Affirmation or forgiveness in this case, then, consists in *kisa*, "covering" the action so that G!d no longer looks on it with displeasure and, subsequently, stays away or reacts. As we previously mentioned, it is the case of the person who got away from their life path—from attaining their hopes and dreams, but who is now back on that path. The idea that one's wrong tracks get "covered," such that no one and no One can see it, implies that the person is back "on track" or, as I translate, is "re-tracked."

lo yach-shov lo avon/accounts no distortion. In this third and final metaphor, the Deity does not *chashav*, "compute" the behavior, that is, does not add it to the Divine accounts ledger and thus the entire unfortunate complex of deed and feelings about it, in this case "the distortion," is simply "not reckoned," inasmuch as it has been discharged or settled, as I explained above.⁶³ Since it no longer remains on the ledger, there no longer remains something for the Accountant to

⁶³ See above, 45-46.

address or redress. Similarly, we find Shim'i's plea to King David:⁶⁴

Al yachashov li, adoni, **avon**; v'al tiz-kor et asher he-eva av-d'cha bayom asher yatsa adoni ha-melech mirushalayim lasum hamelech el libo.

Do not account, my lord, this **twisted action** and so do not remember what action your servant committed on the day my lord the king went out from Jerusalem, so that the king ruminates on it.

Excursus 2: Abraham and Our Reputed Psalmist

In Gn 15:6 G!d "accounts" or "imputes" to Abraham (*chashav*)

exemplariness (*tsedakah*), not waywardness. This invites comparison between Abraham and David, the reputed psalmist.⁶⁵ Abraham is not yet in covenant with G!d; that does not occur until chapter 15. Abraham is also not yet circumcised; that does not occur until chapter 17. Nonetheless Abraham's exemplariness is acknowledged and counted.

David, on the other hand, has already been called and appointed by G!d. He is clearly a member of and party to the covenant. Nevertheless, David's behavior in the episode involving Uriah and Bat-Sheva is deemed "distorted."⁶⁶ The entire year following Nathan's accusation of David on G!d's behalf⁶⁷ was one of anguish for him: in the midst of it, he composed Psalm 51.⁶⁸ That "accounting," then, haunted David, and, according to Tradition, David did not fully work through his role until he made verbal acknowledgment to G!d through this very psalm. Only at this point does G!d not "account" or "impute" distortion. Even so, this "accounting" does not reach the same level of growth that appertains to Abraham, who G!d "accounts" as "exemplary."

⁶⁴ 2 Sm 19:17.

⁶⁵ See Holladay, 128.

⁶⁶ 2 Sm 11.

⁶⁷ 2 Sm 12:1-25.

⁶⁸ See Delitzsch, 251-52.

We discover through this comparison of the respective situations of Abraham and David that affirmation has nothing to do with one's professed beliefs, party affiliation or social status. It has to do with the life one leads, how one handles one's bad moments and one's own dark side. Affirmation, reconciliation, and/or forgiveness are not entitlements. G!d need not affirm or forgive or do either readily.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the Deity "accounts" or "imputes" no continuing guilt to those who are in fact affirmed or forgiven. It is yet possible to live again in a resolved relation with G!d.

This psalm, then, does not deny that we sometimes do not live up to our best capabilities: We sometimes opt for short-term comfort over long-term growth. Sometimes we not only err in judgment, but behave badly. Our psalm exhibits, as do other psalms, an acute yet wholesome sense of the unavoidable and sad experience that that comprises. Yet the acute sense of waywardness does not lead to helplessness and despair. *Ad'raba* ("On the contrary"), out of the full consciousness of the misery brought on through errant conduct, the psalmist cries out all the more boldly to G!d, asking for the gift of reconciliation. And not just an individual, but, as we know from elsewhere, the entire people can bear witness to the possibility of G!d's reconstitution of their status and the relationship between them and the Holy One.⁷⁰

Nasata avon amecha; kisata kaw! chatatam.
 You lifted the distortion of Your people;
 You covered, entirely, any evidence of their straying.

Some scholars, not without reason, suggest that the differences that the

⁶⁹ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 96.

⁷⁰ Ps 85:3.

various terms for waywardness and reconstitution might actually connote may well be beside the point.⁷¹ The clear purposeful literary construction does not seem designed to teach such distinctions. Rather the threefold repetition may suggest shorthand for any deep issue or concern one keeps and the emotional and spiritual complexities that accompany such concern, while the three verbs of reconstitution may point not merely to the specific act of verbalizing one's affirmation, but the complex of emotional feelings and spiritual growth that the process of considering and granting such affirmation brings. Our psalmist does not focus on the dynamics of affirmation or forgiveness but the dynamics of acknowledgement—what leads to it and what it leads to, for it is the acknowledgment, the forthright disclosure or sharing, which mediates the gap between waywardness and reconstitution.

V'ein b'rucho r'miyal

and whose life-spirit contains no deceit

Weinfeld translates *b'rucho*, "in one's spirit," as *b'mach-shav-to*, "in one's thought," "in one's consideration."⁷² Perhaps Weinfeld is influenced here by the reading of the Samaritan Pentateuch, *b'libo*, "in one's heart."⁷³ The ancients considered the heart as the seat of thought. Hence the Samaritan Pentateuch's *b'libo* may well be equivalent to Weinfeld's "in one's thought"; it is not, however, equivalent to the Masoretic text's *b'rucho*.

⁷¹ See, for example, A. A. Anderson, 255.

⁷² Joseph Shalom Halevi Weinfeld, *Sefer Tehillim im Perush M'shulav u-M'shubatz Yesod Malchut* [The Book of Psalms with the Commentary Yesod Malchut [Foundation of the Realm] integrated and inset] (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1995), 86.

⁷³ BHS, 1113.

It seems to me that such an interpretation undermines the force of the precise Hebrew word choice. As the continuation of the psalm will show, it is not just that the psalmist has thought through the issue of personal responsibility and has done such tough thinking honestly and honorably. Rather, the experience of acknowledging before G!d has transformed the psalmist's entire being, even into the deepest layers of personality. Thus *b'rucho* must mean that no trace of deceit remains even in one's "breath" (another literal meaning of *ru-ach*). The English "spirit" in isolation sometimes connotes to listeners something akin to "mood." Hence I am using "life-spirit" to better convey the sense of the Hebrew.

The Septuagint preserves a third reading, translating what seems to have been *b'fiv*, "in one's mouth."⁷⁴ That is, what comes out of one's mouth—one's very words—must matched by one's thoughts and feelings. This reading would certainly suit the context here well, since the center of the Psalmist's experience was the moment of admission.

The Septuagint's reading may well be influenced by the Psalm's theme, the power of sincere verbal admission, and the need for such disclosure. Such a reading may find support as well in Mi 6:12:

v'yosh-veha dib'ru shaker u-l'shonam **r'miyah b'fihem.**
 (the city) whose inhabitants speak guile
 and whose tongue—**deceit is in their mouths.**

Not only does *r'miyah* appear "in the mouths" of bad people, but other passages also use *r'miyah* with similar terms. The word "tongue" may feel superfluous to the verse in Micah. In Ps 52:4, however, the tongue not only "thinks" (*tah-shov*) wrongly, but, like a "sharpened razor," actually "does deceit"

⁷⁴ Ibid.

(ose **r'miyah**). In Ps 101:7 the one who “does deceit” (ose **r'miyah**) stands in parallelism with the one who “speaks artifices” (*dover sh'karim*). The psalmist prays to G!d in 120:2 for rescue from “a lip of artifices” (*mis'fat sheker*) and from a “deceitful tongue” (*mi-lashon r'miyah*). In Jb 13:7 Job asks his companions if they will speak treachery (*t'dab'ru av-la*) or speak deceit (*t'dab'ru r'miyah*) on G!d's behalf. Finally Job later takes up this concern, asserting that as long as he remains alive:⁷⁵

Im t'daberna s'fatay av-la; ul'shoni im yege **r'miyah**.
My lips will not speak treachery; my tongue will not utter **deceit**.

Such passages do show that the word most often refers to verbal deceit, reminding us of the power of words and cautioning us in how we formulate our communications to represent the best within us, our *Tzelem Elokim* (Divine Image) as behooves us as bearers of Divinity. Such passages, as well, make the Septuagint's *b'fiv* an attractive reading.

Nonetheless, the Masoretic text's *b'rucho* must remain our primary reading. *B'fiv* usually connotes one's words. *B'rucho*, in the sense of “breath” conveys that idea and more: not merely one's words but one's tone, one's energy—the entire communication must be devoid of deceit as well as the heart that produces the communication. The choice of the Masoretic text brings to bear, then, both meanings of *b'rucho*, that of “in one's spirit” and “out of one's breath” no “deceit came.” Since one's admission comes from a place of having confronted oneself critically and with trenchant honesty, one's entire being, not merely one's words, will be suffused with a spirit of integrity, sincerity, and genuineness. Since the

⁷⁵ Jb 27:4.

process that leads to admission leads not merely to an acknowledgement of where or when one senses one went off course but primarily toward a change of heart, towards personal growth, the word *b'rucho* fits the context much better.

Finally, we must consider the argument of possible transmission: If some "original text" showed a reading of *r'miyah*, we could yet understand how a later Greek translator, knowing and considering all the other verses where *r'miyah* is used with "speaking," "lips" and "tongue", could translate *b'fiv* even if the word reads *b'rucho*. The translation, then, would be an interpretation. What would be more difficult to explain is an "original reading" of *b'fiv*. We could, of course, understand the Greek using a corresponding term, but why would the Hebrew copyist change the word to one that "does not fit" *r'miyah*, and how would such an "error" get past everyone's notice? In the final analysis, the Septuagint's reading must be adjudged an interpretation, albeit one that powerfully points to the core of the psalm directly; *b'rucho* must be adjudged the more original reading.

With this, I can explore further the concept underlying *r'miyah*, "deceit." It has the sense of "not being reliable" or "being treacherous," not in the secondary sense of that word, "dangerous," but, rather, in the primary sense of "faithless, deceptive, unreliable." Indeed, treacherous comes from the French *trech(ier)*, "to deceive."⁷⁶ *R'miyah* operates in the realm of personal relationships like a weapon that backfires or cannot be depended upon to function. Hos 7:16 and Ps 78:57, for example, have *k'keshet r'miyah*, "like a defective bow." Limburg infers from

⁷⁶ Dictionary.comUnabridged, s.v. "treacherous"
<http://www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/treacherous> (accessed Aug. 4, 2009).

the use of *r'miyah* that a life designated as *ashrei*, that is, an evolving, spiritually developed life, is one lived in a manner that is honest and forthright.⁷⁷

Rashi⁷⁸ contends that G!d does not count the iniquity of someone whose *teshuvah*, whose “return” to one’s life-path or “restoration” to relationship with G!d and any others involved, is without deceit.⁷⁹ That is, one’s very process makes one whole again, wherein one becomes “whole-hearted.” The process, in and of itself, strengthens each person, helping the individual to avoid choosing the wrong path in a similar future context. If one, after such acknowledgement, again opts poorly in a situation that approximates the context in which one made one’s original choice, then others would rightly question the sincerity of the admission. Indeed, one should question oneself about such inconsistencies.

Therefore, the notion that one should intend never to repeat the action is not surprising. Nonetheless, it remains theoretically possible for someone to sincerely process (“repent”) and, at some future time, make a similar wrong choice. How much time must elapse and how different should the circumstances be before we can truly and confidently state that one’s original admission was or was not sincere? It must be admitted that at some point it is difficult to make such an assessment of the deepest and least accessible parts of a person’s inner core, even our own. We must add, as well, that it remains easier for us to allow the words and actions of others to remain our focus and, certainly, to cast

⁷⁷ Limburg, 103.

⁷⁸ Acronym of **R**abbi **S**hlomo **Y**itzchaki (1040-1105), Rashi, the most important and beloved of Jewish commentators, was a viniculturist from Troyes whose efficient work incorporates Midrash and then current French words.

⁷⁹ *Mikra'ot G'dolot*, 3:20b. See Avrohom Davis, *The Metsudah Tehillim* [The Metsudah Psalms]: A New Linear Tehillim [Psalms] with English Translation and Notes (Brooklyn: Metsudah Publications, 1995), 57.

judgment on them, than it is for us to live with the imperfect nature of our own words and actions and the distinction between our behavior, on the one hand, and our intentions and aspirations, on the other.

Jewish tradition ensured that no short cuts in our self-assessment could be made by developing the idea that one's *teshuvah* may be deemed fully sincere and complete only when one opts not to repeat the behavior at some future occasion, perhaps every future occasion, when opportunities in similar situations present themselves. This idea receives fuller treatment in later halakhic (Jewish legal) expositions on restoration, which does indeed consider *teshuvah sh'leimah* ("complete return") as having occurred when the opportunity, even temptation, to repeat the wayward choice arises, and the evolving person does not take the bait and refrains from committing the action.

The approach of Jewish tradition cannot be easily cast as merely examining the issue by focusing upon the ostensible end result. Rather, this idea of *teshuvah sh'leimah*, having one's acknowledgment and articulation be seen as part of a larger process of "complete return" indicates that spiritual progress depends upon *kavvanah*, spiritual direction. By having some self-reflection in the present we might indeed improve the possibility that we will behave differently or better in the future. Of course *teshuvah sh'leimah* certainly does not seem within the immediate purview of the psalmist here; the psalmist rightly wishes to retain a keen focus on the process leading to admission and continuing only through the release and joy afforded by G!d's act of affirmation or forgiveness. Therefore, the psalmist tells us nothing about later times in life when the psalmist succeeded

in avoiding going down the wrong road due to the power of the experience now—or did not so succeed. In this sense, the psalmist seems “to remain in the moment” and stay with her/his feelings of this powerful experience. The process until now—the pain, the shame, the suffering leading to self-examination and greater self-awareness—leads to greater understanding which leads to verbal articulation which leads to Divine forgiveness which leads to release and relief accompanied by tremendous joy, which leads to a desire to share one’s experience within one’s community—that is quite enough to focus on in one psalm.

The idea conveyed in context, then, is that the person seeking or needing affirmation no longer evinces any “deceit,” which, in Delitzsch’s words, “denies or hides, or extenuates or excuses” this or that negative behavior.⁸⁰ The acknowledgment can contain no “ifs, ands, or buts.” The acknowledgment must come with no motive; and without any motive, the person cannot feel and will not claim that s/he got away with something when Gld extends Divine affirmation or forgiveness. This latter Divine gift should not be misconstrued by a penitent as some acclaim to sudden moral purity, a new height from which they can never again descend, only ascend. Rather they must remember that *la-petach chatat rovetz*: “sin” or, rather, “shortcoming”—diversion from one’s spiritual essence or the potential for veering off our path again—always “lies down at the door,”⁸¹ that is, “waits for an opening,” to display itself in our lives. So the clearer significance of the phrase *ein b’rucho r’miyah* is “exemplified by the admission that follows.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Delitzsch, 253.

⁸¹ Gn 4:7.

This absence of “deceit” becomes spelled out as acknowledgment of one’s unfortunate choice and not covering it up.

We have now examined the different possibilities that the psalmist lays out here for spiritual direction. In putting these all together, we could surmise that according to the psalmist here, the evolved person is one who lives not in defiance against the Holy, one whose life is on track, and one whose life has proper shape, with clear direction and marked by honesty and integrity.

⁸² Broyles, 162.

Chapter 4: The Three Stages of the Psalmist's Journey (Vv. 3-7)

This central section comprises three discrete sections (vv. 3-4, 5, 6-7).

Each of these ends with *selah*, a mysterious word which seems best interpreted as a musicological term, although its meaning and etymology remain uncertain.

The term, which appears only in the psalter (seventy-one times) and in Habakkuk (three times), may indicate a stanza break or a musical interlude.¹ Radak²

derives it from the root *s-l-l*, "to raise," and proposes "with a raised voice

(*haramat kol*)."³ Some modern scholars suggest that it represents an

abbreviation, although it remains unknown if the ancient Israelites employed

abbreviations with any regularity.⁴ Whichever, it in effect announces a passage

from one mood to the next, which exemplify the three stages of psycho-spiritual

healing through which the psalmist journeyed. Any interlude, musical or

otherwise, would, at the very least, enable the person to reflect upon each of

these stages.

Stage 1: Awareness. One gains awareness that one's suffering, including one's physical symptoms, stems from not facing up to the emotional load one is bearing and the accompanying shame and/or guilt.

Stage 2: Acknowledgement. One makes a Verbal and public acknowledgement of what one has done, especially in the Presence of the Holy One, who is *rachum v'chanun*, "Compassionate and Gracious."⁵ This brings

¹ The Septuagint renders *selah* as an "interlude."

² Acronym of Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160-1235, French commentator, philosopher and grammarian.

³ Radak cites Is 62:10. See A. J. Rosenberg, *Psalms: A New English Translation*, Vol. 1 (New York: Judaica Press, 1991), 8.

⁴ Berlin and Brettler, 1286.

⁵ Ex 34:6.

relief, clarity and renewed vigor and vision.

Stage 3: Going public. One makes witness to and shares with the community one's experience, including the lesson(s) learned, which demonstrates that the person continues to evolve. One feels fully restored to life when one can reenter relationships with honor. Sharing a life lesson gives back what one understands one took and so helps support one in this effort. Joy then becomes more real and more solidified because it is shared with others.

Stage 1: Getting to Awareness (Vv. 3-4)

These verses describe the struggle in the psalmist's life which led to the awareness of the need to take responsibility and the need to offer acknowledgment. It apparently took a long time for the psalmist to admit the need for reconstitution. Everything leading up to this "click moment," this realization and deep self-awareness, as well as everything leading up to the actual moment of verbal articulation to G'd (and others, when appropriate) I consider as the first stage. Ziff suggests, "We begin not by trying to change but by working to gain awareness of the previously unconscious coping strategies, the old Ego structure."⁶ The first step in personal growth, then, is not "to change" but to learn to feel so that one can become more aware of oneself. In this way one can be more intentional about what kinds of changes one might need or want to make to effectuate the important, deeper change(s) within oneself.

This first stage contains, in the psalmist's reflection, only truly negative feelings about the experience, for in vv. 3-4, the psalmist describes what

⁶ Joel Ziff, *Mirrors in Time: A Psycho-Spiritual Journey through the Jewish Year* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 164.

happened as a result of carrying the spiritual load: The Psalmist's condition deteriorated as the matter remained unacknowledged and without any attention, let alone consideration. Here the psalmist not merely recognizes that wrongful actions can "block life with G!d" but that such "blockage can go unnoticed," for each human carries within a deep potential for *r'miya*, self-deception.⁷

It is not necessary to interpret that the person needing affirmation or forgiveness has some objectively lucid perspective when taking ownership in whatever happened. It may be that the person has little or no reason to experience shame or feel guilty from someone else's standpoint or even from some ostensibly dispassionate stance. Chiel and Dreher call this, in infelicitous phrasing, as "imagined transgression."⁸ Nonetheless, well-meaning friends and family often do contend, "You're imagining all this—get over it" in some variation or another. Such attempts may delay one from examining one's anguish and what might be causing it. Whatever the origin of one's feelings, however, they remain one's feelings. Ignoring them, not sorting them out and otherwise not confronting what lies underneath the feelings, remains unhelpful and, as the Psalmist's experience demonstrates, unhealthful.

While today one regularly notes that repression of feelings can affect one physically, we do not often enough realize the reverse, namely, that, for some, physical suffering may lead one to the conclusion that one has done something wrong. In fact, one's first thought about one's physical suffering usually concerns

⁷ See Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 96.

⁸ Rabbi Samuel Chiel and Henry Dreher, *For Thou Art with Me: The Healing Power of Psalms* (Emmaus, PA: Daybreak Books, 2000), 72.

assessing the possible biological cause and not that such pain might actually connote something wrong with our soul, that our lives do not represent our core. Obviously not every ailment can be assigned to emotional stress or distress. Greenberg aptly notes that rather good people sometimes blame themselves much too easily and all too quickly.⁹ On the other hand, sometimes one may not realize that one is carrying around (*nasa*) something that weighs heavily on one's heart or lies in the background of one's mind, let alone realize the extent that it can cause physical symptoms.

At one time, then, many moderns rejected the biblical idea that the source of one's physical pain was due primarily to misguided life-journeying and not at all due to some neurobiological source for which one's doctor can offer a remedy. Indeed one represented this view as "if one suffers an illness, that person must have committed some 'sin.'" However parodied, the position requires rethinking in light of our discussion, for we moderns now know all too well that emotional stress, distress and trauma all can cause a wide range of physical symptoms and full, complete relief cannot occur until due attention is given to the emotional and psychological issues that underlie and engender the physical discomfort. So while I avoid the language of "sin" and "transgression" as off target and judgmental, I do think that one needs to check in on one's spiritual health, that is, how does one journey through life? Is one true to one's core? Is one journeying in an honorable way? These concerns are important, and one should well

⁹ Rabbi Irving Greenberg, "Afraid But Not Alone: Meditation on Psalm 32," in *Healing of Soul, Healing of Body: Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength and Solace in Psalms*, ed. Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, a project of the Jewish Healing Center (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 35.

wonder when feeling ill if emotional stress or spiritual distress might lay at the heart of what ails the self.

In our psalmist's case, something went unnoticed and certainly unarticulated (v. 3, "I kept silent"). Due to a lack of engagement with the personal concern and in the absence of any acknowledgment and articulation, the entire matter slowly started gnawing away at the psalmist. Physical symptoms could well have ensued (v. 3, "my bones atrophied"; v. 4, "my vitals dried up") without any connection being made. Going to a doctor and going on medication can only mask the symptoms but not heal the hurt. One must at least ask oneself the question of whether or not one's illnesses may be caused in some way by psychic or spiritual distress. Some people's realization comes rather slowly and in stages—so taking in all the ramifications of the consequences of one's concern or one's act all at once may not be possible and perhaps not healthful, and one must not let other well-meaning people to try to push the self too far too fast according to someone else's need to not have to bear to see a friend or family member suffer. Rather, one must be true to one's journey and travel one's own journey in one's own way on one's own timeline.

Sometimes we harbor such deep feelings when we are overcome with grief after the loss of a loved one. Chiel and Dreher claim that such a loss "is almost universally accompanied by guilt."¹⁰ If so, it is clear that most of the time the issue is not some "wrong" that someone did but one's deep sense of loss and feeling of aloneness that comprise the heart of one's hurt. Death, no matter what the circumstances, can certainly leave us feeling vulnerable, and we can

¹⁰ Chiel and Dreher, 74.

experience a whole range of feelings, of which guilt, appropriate or not, is only one. Sometimes these feelings compete: we experience sadness for our loss and yet relief that a loved one no longer suffers. Sometimes we experience too many of these feelings simultaneously, and we may not be able—and are probably not ready—to examine and deal with them in the immediacy of our loss. In Jewish tradition we have not only a funeral (or some other “memorial gathering” or “celebration of life”), but a spiritual calendar within which we can organize our emotional and spiritual life: the bereaved family members and their community gather at the home for seven days of togetherness, designed for sharing, reflecting and feeling. The official mourning period for the family continues through the thirtieth day and, for parents, for one year. This gives us permission to not “be anywhere” emotionally or spiritually. Rather, we recognize our need for patience with ourselves, taking time and the gift of community to grapple slowly with our grief so that healing can happen. Even beyond the time of mourning, Jewish tradition recognizes that a sense of loss yet remains and gives its adherents permission and sacred space to spend time with those feelings on a regular basis, on the Yahrzeit (the anniversary of a loved one’s death demise), and at four major holy days during the year, Yom Kippur, Passover, Shavuot, and Shemini Atzeret.

We sometimes do not recognize that feelings we thought we attended to remain or return. Such lack of recognition can happen around an important marker, such as an important holy day or the deceased loved one’s birthday. We sometimes claim, perhaps because we think we are supposed to claim, that we

have reached resolution and that we are “good,” but that is not always where the heart finds itself at the time. If we remain entrenched in such claims, then we remain mute in our suffering, compounding the pain by locking it up inside.¹¹

Popular culture in the United States encourages us to downplay our feelings, so that we sometimes do not value enough any feelings that society tells us are “negative.” So, for example, the prevailing sociocultural climate sees guilt as negative. However, guilt actually represents a vital message to us from within, from our spiritual core. At the same time, guilt may also represent a vital message from without, the collective moral code of society bringing its weight to bear on our consciousness and from the Holy One (or “the Universe”) wanting us to regain our bearings so that we can get back to living out who we essentially are.¹² So whenever one feels some guilt, the healthy person will investigate these feelings. Indeed, most often when one feels guilt, one is experiencing a need for verbal acknowledgment.

However, sometimes people confuse guilt with shame. People feel guilt when they veer off their life path by doing something that does not represent their best. This feeling of guilt serves as a motivational impetus for amelioration and improvement. Depending on what prompted the guilt, a person can do something about it, inviting into conversation some person or persons who one feels deep down should know one’s feelings, to discuss the episode.¹³ Shame,

¹¹ Chiel and Dreher, 74.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³ Abraham J. Twerski, *Addictive Thinking*, second ed., pt. 1 of Abraham J. Twerski and Craig Nakken, *Addictive Thinking and The Addictive Personality* (New York: MJF Books: 1999), 67.

on the other hand, represents how people feel about themselves. Shame engenders what Craig Nakken refers to as “a loss of *self-respect*, *self-esteem*, *self-confidence*, *self-discipline*, *self-determination*, *self-control*, *self-importance*, and *self-love*.”¹⁴ Shame is a state where someone has lost themselves; spiritually, the person cannot connect with the Divine Image planted within the self. Shame, then, has little or nothing to do with any specific action or series of actions that a person does; it has everything to do with one’s self-worth. People who feel unworthy of love and friendship easily isolate and compound the problem. Feelings of shame do not compel anyone to positive action. Rather they lead one to feelings of discouragement, disheartenment and, despondency. At such a point, one tends to submit to one’s lowly self-image, become docile and passive with respect to regaining one’s footing on one’s life-path, and so fall into stasis, or keep a person there.¹⁵ So while many commentators understand our psalmist as experiencing guilt that causes the psalmist’s physical symptoms and withdrawal from others, it seems to me at least as likely that the psalmist harbors feelings of shame.

When one feels that they cannot make such an admission—or when one remains unwilling to acknowledge—then the person is keeping something inside of the self that will cause harm and even wreak havoc. Of course, constant admissions, or over-admission, can do damage, too. When others point out to us that we are expressing—or we hear ourselves expressing—concern about one particular aspect of something over and over again, however important, we must

¹⁴ Craig Nakken, *The Addictive Personality*, second ed., pt. 2 of Twerski and Nakken, *Addictive Thinking and The Addictive Personality* (New York: MJF Books: 1999), 29.

¹⁵ Twerski, 67.

wonder about what is going on within ourselves and what need we have yet to discover and begin to address. Nonetheless, over-confession does not seem to be the modern temper or our current cultural marker. Demonstrations of deep feelings or true remorse seem rarer today. The word remorse derives from the Latin *mordere* “to bite,” and *re*, “again.” It seems similar to the more contemporary phrase, “What’s eating him?” Shakespeare used the phrase, “worm of conscience,”¹⁶ as if guilt and remorse that remain without personal acknowledgment can gnaw away at us,¹⁷ what may be “eating us” is not guilt but something else, such as fear of rejection or shame. In any event, we must take notice that the Psalmist’s distress is not so much caused by any one act itself as it is by one’s silence in regard to one’s emotional and spiritual distress. It may be true, as I have suggested, that upon such acknowledgment and admission one starts to release the feelings attendant to shame or guilt, which one may certainly discover during the process that one has felt more shame or more guilt than was warranted. Contrarily, one may discover that the ramifications of one’s silence are even greater than the person had ever realized. In either case, the struggling and the realization that led to verbal articulation comprise part of a healthful process that can help proceed to get us on a better course, our *derech*, or “life-path.”

The psalmist had left things bottled up inside and found the self in an increasingly desperate condition, which was then accompanied by physical

¹⁶ *Richard III*, 1:3.

¹⁷ Mark Van Doren and Maurice Samuel, *The Book of Praise: Dialogues on the Psalms*, ed. Edith Samuel (New York: John Day Co., 1975), 150-51.

manifestations. The image of v. 4 depicts a life draining away as when a plant shrivels up in the relentless summer sun, so much so that the Hebrew renders “*torridity*” in the plural, “*torridities*.” The psalmist is completely spent. The interconnection between one’s physical, emotional and spiritual health seems in view here, one accompanied, perhaps by feelings of guilt, appropriate or not—and most likely due to the psalmist’s susceptibility to feelings of deep shame. Both Rashi and Radak suggest that one’s bones wasted away through constant worry and grumbling.¹⁸

Balu atsamay/My bones atrophied

I have suggested that this phrase represents a literal truth, namely, that feelings can weigh so heavily upon us that we can experience and exhibit physical symptoms. In the psalm immediately preceding ours the psalmist begs the Holy One:¹⁹

Chaneini YHVH ki tsar li...
ki chalu v'yagon chayay ush-notay ba-anacha
Kashal **ba-avoni** chochi **va-atsamay** asheishu.

Be gracious to me, YHVH, for I am in a narrow strait...
my life is spent in sorrow, my years in sighing.
My strength, because of **my distortedness**, failed me—
and **my bones** have wasted away.

Elsewhere²⁰ the psalmist asserts that

Ein-shalom **ba-atsamay** mip'nei **chatati**.
There is no peace within **my bones** because of **my straying**.

The inner discord and discomfort compel the psalmist to ask the Deity for healing:²¹

¹⁸ Rosenberg, 111.

¹⁹ Ps 31:10-11.

²⁰ Ps 38:4.

**R'fa-eini, YHVH, ki niv-halu atsamay.
Heal me, YHVH, for my bones shake.**

VanGemerén finds here²² an association with Ezekiel's tremendous vision of the Valley of Dry Bones.²³ There the bones signify "the hopelessness and meaninglessness of life" off of one's path, away from G!d. That metaphor does fit in well with my interpretation.

Some manuscripts read not *balu*, "atrophied," but *kalu*, "were consumed, were finished." In such a reading, the psalmist resorts to poetic hyperbole to render the intensity of the pain. Mowinckel points to the essentialness of the account of distress, because "as a rule it meant a question of life and death."²⁴ In our psalm, this is true: to remain in stasis, to remain in hiding from one's feelings, is to die where it matters most: inside. My analysis, then, holds in every respect.

Hecherash-ti...b'sha-agati kol hayom!

I kept silent...while I grumbled, constantly

Alter finds the text difficult here, because *sh'a-gah* can mean "roaring," and the "roaring" seems a counterclaim to the psalmist's assertion of silence in the first half of the verse.²⁵ Alter surmises that "a phrase has been dropped out that would have formed a complementary parallelism." Such a finding seems, to me, unnecessary—and not merely because no textual evidence to support such a claim is adduced.

My understanding of the psalm accounts for both halves. The Tanakh does

²¹ Ps 6:3.

²² VanGemerén, 273.

²³ Ez 37.

²⁴ Mowinckel, 2:35.

²⁵ Alter, 110.

apply the term to the lion family in three of its seven occurrences,²⁶ but the term also represents the “human cry in distress.”²⁷ Miller contends that this may encompass not merely moans but “the desperate, even angry, outcry of the sufferer.”²⁸ *Midrash Tehillim* contends that the distress was related to the “anguish of exile” (*elbon hagalut*),²⁹ but this cannot possibly refer to the exile of the people from the land to Babylonia. The psalm offers no hint of being written in or about the exile. And, as we shall see, evidence exists that this psalm was written for use in the Temple. The “anguish of exile,” therefore, must mean something else. I believe it refers to the exile from one’s own self, from one’s life path, from living life fully, a type of exile that people do sometimes impose on themselves—and a sense of exile that becomes aggravated when one neglects to confront one’s intense emotional and spiritual burdens.

The silence, then, of the psalmist is not a silence of all sound but a silence regarding the contents of one’s heart. The silence refers not to every communication of any kind that the psalmist might make, then, but, rather, only to the lack of verbal acknowledgment and admission around the difficult matters that the psalmist carries around inside. The “grumbling” represents the malaise that such repressed feelings engendered. Delitzsch, too, considers the grumbling as due to the inward roar of the conscience or soul.³⁰ So the psalmist was roaring internally in anguish but never communicated what needed to be communicated,

²⁶ Is 5:29, Zec 11:3 and Jb 4:10.

²⁷ *BDB*, 980.

²⁸ Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

²⁹ S. Buber, 122a.

³⁰ Delitzsch, 253.

an anguish that may well have generated physical symptoms. The psalmist surely “grumbled.” The word “grumble” comes from the Old English *grymman*, meaning “to wail.”³¹ One can exhibit “wailing” through sounds only, with words, often rather indistinct, or some combination of both words and sounds. The English “grumble,” therefore, can mean “to utter low, indistinct sounds,” “to murmur or mutter in discontent,” or “to complain sullenly.” Both the Hebrew and the English “grumble” can represent articulate and/or inarticulate sounds that focus on one’s symptom(s) but not on one’s problem. However the psalmist “acted out,” even with “roaring” complaints, the point remains that until the psalmist broke silence regarding the untoward behavior or speech or whatever was bottled up inside by speaking directly to the matter—and speaking truthfully and pointedly to it—the psalmist remained like an animal in pain.

Ki yomam valayla tich-bad alay yadechal

For day and night Your Hand weighed on me

Often people who suffer find it very hard to get a handle on their suffering. Perhaps they do not yet have a diagnosis. Perhaps they have experienced difficulty in finding the right treatment modality at just the right dose. Perhaps they are high on the pain scale or find that they have become addicted to the medication. Perhaps they just do not understand why all of this is happening to them. Perhaps they have information they yearn to share but fear a lack of positive, supportive response by those who matter most. In all of these instances, and so many others, we often find people turning their hurt outward to

³¹ Dictionary.comUnabridged, s.v. “grumble,”
<http://www.dictionary.reference.com/browse/grumble> (accessed August 4, 2009).

G!d. They may or may not blame G!d. But they often feel as if they experience the “weight” of G!d’s “hand,” as if the Divine Hand were spanking them, punishing them. This framing of one’s woes may well be ill-considered, but the psalmist’s honesty in depicting it this way resonates with our own experience and those of our loved ones.

Hafach l’shadi/My vital fluids dried up

Commentators over the generations, at least as far back as Saadiah Gaon,³² have construed the *lamed* here as a preposition belonging to the verb.³³ They thus read this as *hafach l*, “to change (in)to; convert into.” Such an interpretation then takes *l’shadi* as coming from the root *shadad*, “to deal violently with, to despoil, to ruin.”³⁴ Saadiah himself adduces Ps 91:6 as support:

Midover ba-ofel yahaloch; miketev **yashud** tsahorayim.
(You need not fear) From the plague that in darkness moves,
from the scourge that **despoils** at noon.”

I find, however, that the use of *shod*, “devastation,” does not fit here. The word is generally used for violence as a social phenomenon. So, for example, Am 3:10 speaks of *hamas vashod*, two synonyms meaning “violence.”³⁵ We also find it referring to the devastation of an entire group, usually a nation, as we find, for example, in Isa 51:19:

Hashod v’ha-shever, v’ha-ra’av v’ha-herev—mi anachamech.

³² Saadiah ben Yosef al-Fayyumi, (known simply as Saadiah), 882/892-942, was philosopher, Jewish legal expert, Hebrew linguist, exegete and Gaon, an honorific title for the head of the two prime Babylonian Academies in Sura and Pumbedita, from the end of the 6th c. to the beginning of the 11th c.

³³ Saadiah Gaon, *The Book of Psalms: Tafsir [Translation] and Commentary* [in Hebrew], ed. and trans. Yosef Kafach [Kafih, Kapach, Qafih] (Jerusalem: n.p., 1966), 103-04.

³⁴ *BDB*, 994.

³⁵ These two words appear together also in Jer 6:7, 20:8, Ez 45:9 and Hb 1:3. See as well Is 60:18. The use of the two together may reinforce the sense of social breakdown, and may constitute a hendiadys for it.

Devastation and crushing, famine and sword—who can comfort you?

The use is extended once to fortresses,³⁶ which protect a community, and once to beasts:³⁷

V'chol miv-tsarecha **yushad k'shod** Shalman Beit Arvel.
And all your fortresses shall be **devastated** like the **devastation** Shalman (did to) Beth-Arbel.

Ki hamas L'vanon y'chaseka; v'**shod** b'heimot y'chitan.
The violence against Lebanon shall cover you; and the **destruction** of beasts shall dismay you.

The word *shod*, then, expresses a devastation that affects a very large group, usually an entire nation. As such, the identity of each individual sufferer becomes subsumed under the weight of the larger tragedy. If Saadiah's reading here could be sustained, it would prove singular and anomalous.

In a different direction, some commentators accept Kraus' emendation to *l'shoni*, "my tongue."³⁸ This proposal would highlight the need for verbalization of one's misdeed in order to move forward with one's life. The use of the word "tongue" would hint toward the anatomical solution to the problem of the weight of the Divine "Hand," a "hand" that appears only two words earlier. Nonetheless, the proposal has no support in the manuscripts or versions.

Moreover, I not only find reasons against these interpretations, another reading presents itself which fits in far more easily in the context of the entire Psalm. The *lamed*, in my opinion, forms part of the root of the noun, which

³⁶ Hos 10:14.

³⁷ Hb 2:17.

³⁸ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Die Psalmen* [The Psalms], 2 vol., Biblischer Kommentar, Altes Testament, Bd. 15, 5th ed. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978), 400; quoted in Peter C. Craigie, 264. See, as well, Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 284.

signifies *succus*, “bodily fluid, vital fluid.” In Nm 11:8, *l’shad hashemen* means “cream of the fat (or oil),” rendered by NJPS as “rich cream.”³⁹ Onkelos⁴⁰ there translates as *rutvi*, “my moisture.”⁴¹ Some render here, then, as “sap” or “marrow.” So, for example, Hirsch speaks of the psalmist’s “sap” as being “almost completely sapped and, therefore, the psalmist’s “strength” as well.”⁴² This latter direction of opinion was already seen in *Midrash Tehillim*, where one opinion, either that of Rabbi Yosi or Rav, holds that the term signifies *rotev sh’mani* (‘moisture of my fat/oil’).⁴³ Buber adds that Dunash also interprets thus.⁴⁴ Today Chiel and Dreher assert that emotional and psychic pain can “sap our energies and even make us ill.”⁴⁵

B’charvonei kayitz/summer’s torridity

The *bet* seems best interpreted as the *bet* indicating state or condition. Alter aptly notes that the plural form *charvonei*, means “parchednesses.”⁴⁶ The phrase, then, signifies a rather complete withering of all one’s “vital fluids,” a total “de-generation.” The person so dried up, so far from where they could be or should be in their life-journey, certainly differs, as VanGemeren observes, from the “evolved person” of Ps 1:3.⁴⁷

³⁹ JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 307.

⁴⁰ Onkelos (c. 35-120), a Jew-by-Choice, translated the Pentateuch into Aramaic. His translation, *Targum Onkelos* [Onkelos’ translation], became the official Eastern (i.e. Babylonian) targum; however, its origins may be western (i.e. Palestinian).

⁴¹ Rosenberg, 111.

⁴² Hirsch, 227. Danziger also cites Hirsch but inexplicably translates as “My freshness was transformed,” suggesting something short of the complete desiccation and disintegration indicated in the Hebrew. See Hillel Danziger, ed. and trans., *The ArtScroll Tehillim* [Psalms] (Mesorah Publications: 1988), 63.

⁴³ Solomon Buber, 122a. The midrash cites Nm 11:8 as well.

⁴⁴ Dunash ibn Labrat, 920-990, was a commentator, poet and grammarian living in Fez, Morocco. See also Rosenberg, 111, where Onkelos and all commentators take this approach.

⁴⁵ Chiel and Dreher, 74.

⁴⁶ Alter, 111.

*The (evolved person) will be like a tree planted near streams of water:
It yields fruit in its time and its leaf does not wither.
The (evolved person) will, in all endeavors, succeed.*

Keeping up one's fluid intake in such extreme heat is vital to functioning. Here the person requires such "vital fluids" to become "fluid" once again, that is, to find one's vitality, get back on track, and move forward with one's life.

Stage 2: Getting to and Offering Acknowledgment/Admission (V. 5)

I have contended that when one does not do *vidui*, that is, does not verbally acknowledge one's deep concerns or admit to one's deeds and their ramifications, for whatever reason, one starts to destroy oneself inside. The implication is that *vidui* is healthful, even curative. So the second stage in the process comes when the psalmist not only self-examines, but when the psalmist musters the courage to begin articulating the deep feelings and concerns of the heart, in this case to G!d. The Psalmist, knowingly or not, has wanted to get on the right path and move in the right direction, and finally arrives at the point where s/he offers admission to the Deity. The verse describes the incredible release that comes with acknowledgment and articulation to G!d of one's emotional and spiritual situation. The seeds for restoration are sown in the acknowledgment of what one is or has become (or not) and what one has done (or not).

The release and attendant amelioration of our symptoms, physical and emotional, can often feel almost immediate, if not complete. The pain of our emotional lives seemingly lasts forever. A sense of affirmation feels

⁴⁷ VanGemeren, 273.

instantaneous, often encouraging us to take more steps to move forward with our personal growth, and so build on those feelings.

Verse 5 seems to form an *inclusio* with vv. 1-2. McCann calls to our attention the following chiasmus:⁴⁸

n'suil "covered," i.e. "forgiven" (v. 1)
pesha "defiance" (v.1)
f'sha'ay "my defiances" (v. 5)
nasatal "You covered," i.e. "You forgave" (v.5)

McCann notes that we humans who "evolve" (*ashrei*) are those who, recognizing our own shortcomings, begin the process that begins with acknowledgment and admission—that is by not "covering up" those shortcomings—and that leads to Divine "forgiveness" or affirmation. The verse itself exhibits its own chiastic structure, noticed by Brueggemann, in its repeated use of the basic words for wrongdoing:⁴⁹

Chetl "aberration"
avonl "distortion"
peshal "defiance"
avonl "distortion"
chetl "aberration"

This heavy concentration of the rhetoric of "misguided journeying" is matched by covenantal activity of a simple, elegant, powerful kind:

I admitted/You lifted up

This constitutes a continuum with nothing in between.⁵⁰ The true act of affirmation or forgiveness follows the true act of admission directly, without condition or mediator. The emphatic pronoun "You" seems to shore up just how

⁴⁸ McCann, 806.

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *Message*, 96.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

amazing—though mysterious—and just how life-changing, this affirmation and/or forgiveness can feel. McCann notes that none of the various words for errant journeying ever appears again.⁵¹

The word *amarti* here can mean “I hereby acknowledge”; thus, it is followed by *v’ata nasata*, and not *vatisa*.⁵² *V’ata nasata* indicates that the forgiveness comes nearly simultaneous with the psalmist’s admission. Nonetheless, Divine forgiveness is not granted as a foregone conclusive step; rather, it remains in the realm of mystery, just as we often experience the forgiveness granted to us by the people who inhabit our lives. The psalmist quite rightly, then, spends no time investigating the dynamics of Divine Compassion that leads the Holy One to grant forgiveness.

We again find a series of three: three verbs for confession—*l’hodi-a*, *lo l’chasot* and *l’hodot*. These three verbs found a counterpart in the three nouns used for wrongdoing—*pesha*, *chata’ah* and *avon*. Moreover these verbs find an even more striking complement in the three verbs used for affirmation/forgiveness, also found in vv. 1-2. (*lin-so*, *l’chasot*, *lo lach-shov*): they each comprise two verbs in a positive formulation and one in a negative formulation.⁵³

In a homiletical vein, one could point to the singular negative aspect of acknowledgment and admission. I do not refer to facing ourselves, for that happens before acknowledgment and admission and is always positive, if painful.

⁵¹ McCann, 806.

⁵² Delitzsch, 253.

⁵³ VanGemeren, 271.

Rather, facing the injured party remains the one potentially negative piece of the process, for the injured party, whether human or Divine, theoretically may reject us—and sometimes humans do. Obviously the specter of rejection remains a potent force for us: It requires courage to address a person we love to share something about our selves that they may find difficult to support, let alone embrace; or, otherwise, face someone we love but have somehow hurt, knowing that our admission may not be well-received. It requires emotional fortitude to ensure that our acknowledgment or admission is wholly other-directed and not self-serving. It requires serious thought and planning so that the “cure” does not feel worse than the “ailment,” that is, to express ourselves appropriately to avoid our causing further damage when we actually do acknowledge or admit.

Nonetheless, we must realize that the trade-off is not an equal one: the positive aspects, these two corresponding sets of verbs suggest, out-weigh the negative one greatly. So much time hurting, so much time in shame for not acting sooner, so much time in self-loathing—all these start to fall by the wayside rather quickly once one has reached out to offer admission. The change, then, that one feels when one not only resolves to change one’s direction for the better but when one takes action, begins virtually immediately—at least, the inner psychological change. Hopefully, that feeling will encourage us to continue to dare to tell other interested parties and to continue to engage in further emotional and spiritual work.

The moment of admission can, as well, serve as a threshold to a new, or at least renewed, awareness of G!d. G!d responds not merely to the thoughts of

admission that one may harbor and feel quite deeply, but, rather, to the action of one who wants to break through the shame and despair by this intentional act of admission. Levine points out that “to acknowledge” with an awareness that G!d listens is “to speak with performative force,” that is, the very verbalization of acknowledging precisely what we have done and acknowledging the responsibility can itself have curative or transformative effect.⁵⁴

Further, upon admission one starts living again, and differently, and can rebuild one’s life. I intend here the rebuilding not just of one’s interior life but of one’s outer life as well, hopefully beginning with some repair to the damaged relationship. This new awareness can be short-lived or long-lived, but depending upon our spiritual depth, we hope that the life-lesson has been integrated into our emotional structure. With this new vantage point, we will be ready to learn other life lessons that we can then integrate.

Levine adds that to know that G!d forgave us is “to recognize that one’s utterance had a performative effect.” G!d’s voice may not necessarily boom, “I affirm you as you are!” or “You are forgiven for that action!” Nonetheless, the one offering contrite admission knows that she or he has indeed received the same. Franz Rosenzweig,⁵⁵ describes how the act of admission produces in us the awareness that we are loved by G!d.⁵⁶ By stating “I have wronged,” Rosenzweig writes, “the soul abolishes shame...clear[ing] the way for the acknowledgment ‘I am a wrongdoer.’” Throwing away “the compulsion of shame,” the soul that

⁵⁴ Levine, 98.

⁵⁵ Influential German theologian and philosopher, 1887-1929.

⁵⁶ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. from the 2nd ed. by William W. Hallo, 1930 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971; reprint, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1985), 178-181.

acknowledges “gives itself up entirely to love” and to loving kindness, to *chesed*.⁵⁷ Surrendering itself to the presence of G!d’s love and forgiveness, the soul’s certainty of both G!d’s love and forgiveness comes “not from G!d’s mouth, but from its own.”

The psalmist here then portrays admission as a psycho-religious necessity. That acknowledgment was certainly the turning point for the psalmist. And we learn: No deed we did was so terrible as to exhaust G!d’s infinite love and forgiveness.⁵⁸ Now, facing G!d directly—focused on the Loving Presence and not only on the self-imposed torture, the finite, the shame or the presumed guilt—the person can discover a healing release. When one is sinking, one feels totally wrapped in one’s own fear/s and pain/s, yet it remains possible “to break out.” When G!d’s Presence surrounds us, we feel wrapped in *chesed*, a loving kindness that always remains available to us.⁵⁹ Greenberg astutely reminds us that physical discomfort, however great, “can obscure but cannot degrade our preciousness” to Shechinah⁶⁰ and that “fear can erode but not negate the truth of our being loved,” for each person constitutes “an Image” of Shechinah, of infinite worth, unique, irreplaceable.⁶¹ The face of Shechinah remains toward us, “G!d’s eye on us,”⁶² at all times.

Because the primary issue is psycho-spiritual and not physical, it matters not that healing does not come with full restoration of all our physical capabilities.

⁵⁷ See v.10.

⁵⁸ See Irving Greenberg, 35.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁶⁰ In Kabbalah, G!d’s nurturing (Female) Presence, and the part of G!d available to humanity.

⁶¹ Irving Greenberg, 38-39.

⁶² See v. 8b.

Sometimes it does not. One must keep in mind, however, that the key to the psalmist's pain was never the physical symptoms but, rather, the complex of feelings borne from the lack of acknowledgment of the wrongdoing to G!d, which can never be ameliorated when one does not acknowledge within who one is or what one has done. Since the healing we require, then, is, first and foremost, psycho-spiritual healing, it is that which we must seek. That healing is powerful and transformative, such that our life post-*vidui* (acknowledgment) is surely finer and our living potentially holier, then it was before *vidui* and certainly more so than it could possibly have been with no *vidui*. The life we live with no physical discomfort but extreme emotional distress remains a life without deep joy and a much more difficult row to hoe than one in which one bears physical discomfort but remains free of emotional turmoil.

We can become sick if we harbor profound guilt over a real or even an imagined misdeed or, alternatively, if we carry shame over our personal reality. Our vitality wanes. G!d's heavy hand can suffocate rather than support human efforts. The physical suffering is not merely physical: it is Divine withdrawal. Deliverance comes when the afflicted wrongdoer resolves to end the "cover-up", allowing G!d to "cover up" (*k'sui*) the wrongdoing in the sense of no longer regarding the misdeed. G!d, if you will, carries the act away (*nasa*). With it gone, physical deterioration ends and bodily wholeness returns.

Thus v. 5 spells out and completes the sentiments first mentioned in v. 1. It is situated as the fulcrum of the psalm.⁶³ The psalmist gives up carrying the

⁶³ Clifford, 165.

burden and allows G!d to carry it away and gives up trying to cover the sin and allows G!d to cover it. The text thus links admission and forgiveness in v. 5, just as v. 2 links the absence of deceit and forgiveness.⁶⁴ One's ability to "come clean" through a verbal articulation to the hurt party constitutes, for the psalmist, the absence of deceit.

So one part of the human story is that acting from shame and repressing negative thoughts can lead to depression and physical deterioration. When that happens the Divine hand can weigh heavily on a person who "lives inside," that is, one is not on the right path and makes no effort and, possibly, cannot make the effort, to get back on it. The effects, in the case of the psalmist, seemed to have remained entirely personal rather than social. In remaining in this stasis, anyone who behaves as the psalmist misses the blessings of vitality, protection, integrity, and trust.⁶⁵ Relying exclusively on one's own resources, one wastes away until one allows G!d to do what one insisted on doing oneself. When G!d covers it and carries it away, one is truly freed of the burden. One meets the Compassionate Presence. The power one gives to one's emotional load, which we felt separated us from all, is now ended. One can live again.

Notice that there are no ifs, ands, or buts in the admission at the center of this psalm. There are no denials or excuses offered. The psychic and spiritual load does not arise from others. Yes, others may try to put us on a "guilt trip," but it is we who climb aboard. Relief and deliverance can only come when the person resolves to end the cover-up, allowing G!d to do the work of "covering up"

⁶⁴ Broyles, 162.

⁶⁵ Clifford, 168.

so that the entire episode can no longer operate deleteriously. Affirmation and forgiveness always include the Divine; neither is ever entirely a human work, and neither ever comes through the effort of a single human alone. True affirmation and true forgiveness can only occur when two parties meet.⁶⁶

The best course, then, when one wrongs a life mate, a parent, a friend, a neighbor, a co-worker—anyone with whom one is in relationship—is to acknowledge one's truth or admit the wrong one feels one has done by putting it into very clear words so that it is there in speech available for discussion and consideration.⁶⁷ One never knows what discoveries dialogue may bring. When one articulates the concern in a specific way for another party, it becomes more possible and more practicable to deal with not only the initial action but the concerns and issues underlying it. When one refrains and refuses to make such admission, the wrong is retained and sheltered within, where it may begin to shape one's identity: "It hardens; it harms; it diminishes." So silent admission is not admission, for in the silence every affliction and problem takes the form of perception of the judgment of G!d. When we experience G!d not as Covenant Partner but as Other, silence becomes, in Mays's words, "the performance of stubborn pride or of a spirit struck dumb for fear of being found out."⁶⁸

Excursus 3: Adam and Our Psalmist

What Mays describes is the way of Adam hiding from the Presence, surely a *chata'ah*, a "straying," from his path. Bible readers associate Adam's hiding with the events before G!d confronts and punishes him, Eve and the snake.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid., 166, 167.

⁶⁷ Mays, 147.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

However, later writings evince a deeper understanding of this hiding. Job, for example, contrasts himself with Adam, who covered up (*kisiti*, same root as *k'sui*) his defiance.⁷⁰ The Hebrew there renders defiance in the plural, *p'sha'ay*. This suggests that Adam's "defiance" cannot be located in a single act or statement.

Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer,⁷¹ too, finds Adam's wrongfulness in more than a single misdeed.⁷² It suggests that Adam's hiding continues long after this moment, until he processes his wrong and finds his way to acknowledge to the hurt Party, G'd, his wayward course.

On Sunday, Adam went into the waters of the upper Gihon⁷³ until the waters reached up to his neck, and he fasted seven weeks of seven days until his body became like a species of seaweed. Adam stated before the Holy Blessed One: "Sovereign of all realms! Remove, I beseech You, my straying (*chatati*) from me and accept my *teshuvah*, my hope for and process toward restoration, and all future generations will learn that *teshuvah* is possible and that You accept the return of those returning. What did the Holy Blessed One do? G'd put forth the Divine right hand,⁷⁴ accepted his *teshuvah* and took away from him his straying, as it is stated,⁷⁵

"My straying I acknowledge to You, and my distortedness I no longer hide. I hereby declare: 'I admit my defiance to YHVH; You lift the distortedness of my straying.' *Selah*"

"Selah" in this world and "Selah" in the world to come....

Rabbinic tradition then envisions that Adam's woes did not end with the

⁶⁹ See Gn 2:25-3:19.

⁷⁰ Jb 31:33.

⁷¹ This midrash on Genesis, parts of Exodus and a few verses of Numbers was composed shortly after 833.

⁷² *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* [The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer] (Warsaw: n.p., 1874); reprint [in Hebrew] www.daat.ac.il/daat/vl/tohen/asp?id=293, 19a (accessed August 16, 2009). See Gerald Friedlander, trans. and ed., *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer: The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great*, 4th ed. (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), 147.

⁷³ Some identify the upper Gihon with the pool of Siloam, on the basis of 2 Chr 32:30.

⁷⁴ The Divine right hand is symbolic of the fullness of compassion, as opposed to the strict justice that the left hand would indicate.

⁷⁵ Quoting our psalmist here at 32:5.

expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and that they, in fact, did not end until the moment that Adam, like our psalmist, makes admission to G!d. Indeed, this startling midrash places the exact words of the psalmist's admission into Adam's mouth. This fact recommends that we explore this midrash further.

Adam's exile was not merely geographical. It was social in that it clearly affected his relationship with G!d, not to mention the probable strain that his and Eve's behavior may have placed upon their relationship. Even more so, this midrash raises the amount of psychic stress and spiritual distress his behavior caused himself. The midrash places Adam in a position where he has already acknowledged to himself the harm that his actions have caused. Here he prepares to get back to who his spiritual essence is and to prepare to openly acknowledge and apologize to the One he hurt. Although he may have consulted with Eve, his preparations are described in this midrash as part of the process he undergoes. As with our psalmist, the carrying of spiritual load can feel very lonely and one can feel very isolated. The point is made stronger when we consider how through much of Adam's life, we speak not of "Adam or Eve," but "Adam and Eve." Even in the complex of deeds that finally leads to exile we consider them in tandem, as G!d even brings them together to mete out consequences. After the fact of exile, they still live together and constitute a family, yet in the matter of spiritual evolving, they each must do so alone, even if in tandem with each other and with community. Eve's path toward restoration of her relationship with G!d, then, must remain the subject of another midrash; this one can only explore Adam's journey.

Part of Adam's preparation to meet G!d consists of immersion in water, which in many traditions indicates transition, a change in status. Adam signals his change vis-à-vis his relationship with G!d and vis-à-vis his spiritual life through the immersion. Significantly as well, it remains a ritual that some religious Jews perform as part of their spiritual preparation for facing G!d on Yom Kippur, the Day of Expiation, when Jews publicly acknowledge their lives, including especially their errant life journeying, and seek the reconstitution or restoration of their relationship with G!d (and others) as well as redress for any wrongs committed.

Another part of Adam's preparation consists of a period of fasting. The period mentioned here is "seven weeks of seven days," with seven serving as a model of completeness and wholeness. He will be completely transformed by his experience and process and is journeying toward wholeness. Significant as well is that Jews fast on Yom Kippur as part of a spiritual discipline that will demonstrate a change of spiritual direction and, hopefully, lead to a restoration of their relationship with G!d.

Furthermore, the period of Adam's fasting will resonate in the Jewish community as precisely the time frame of the Omer period, a period of "seven weeks of seven days" that connects the holy day period of Passover to that of Shavuot, the "Festival of Weeks."⁷⁶ Observant Jews traditionally count and consider every specific day of those seven weeks. Passover, when G!d demonstrates great care of the people by raising up a leader, Moses, who helps lead the people out of Egypt, is seen in Jewish tradition as the beginning of the

⁷⁶ See Lv 23:15-17, Dt 16:9-10.

relationship—a love relationship—between the people and G!d. Shavuot traditionally marks the time of the Revelation of the Holy One to the people at Mount Sinai. It is understood as the beginning of the covenantal relationship between the people and G!d. G!d has courted the people, as it were, for these seven weeks and on Shavuot, the marriage takes place that cements this loving Covenant. Just as the people count the time until their wedding day in which they will bind themselves into a mutually, loving covenantal relationship with G!d, so does Adam in this midrash, bide his time, “seven weeks of seven days” until he attempts to reconcile with G!d and restore or reconstitute the mutually loving relationship between them.

Our psalm does not portray what specific spiritual disciplines the psalmist may have used to prepare for the moment of admission verbally to G!d, but both Adam and our psalmist find their bodies dwindling. Adam and our psalmist both give their admissions publicly and verbally. Adam, quite astoundingly, even incorporates into his public acknowledgment the Psalmist’s exact words of admission in Ps 32:5. It matters not that Adam could not have known this Psalm if it was only written by King David, as traditionally thought, or later. Rather, the connection moves the idea of verbal acknowledgment back in time. The need and impulse to release and share one’s feelings, to show remorse and to try to reconcile through verbal admission no longer remain something that King David is portrayed as doing, and no longer remain people-specific; rather, we now view this process as something healthful and built into the human personality. The need for one’s verbal articulation of admission is now timeless and universal,

something that happened even in pre-historic times. This need was innate, even within Adam, whose name literally means “earthling,” connoting every person.

Verbal admission is no longer King David’s alone; it is for all of us.

The last line of the midrash may be explained in two ways, and both ways may well be intended. The double use of *selah* is surely due to the fact that the term both precedes and follows the Psalmist’s admission. *Selah* in rabbinic tradition may mean “forever.” Indeed the Targum on Psalms renders the term as *l’alma* or *l’al-min*.⁷⁷ In this case, Adam wants to reconstitute his relationship with G!d for now and always, and states this powerfully, even if by using a rabbinic Hebrew he may not have known. What is important here is that Adam demonstrates that no *r’miyah* resides in his soul; he desires to go forward on his life-path in restored relationship with G!d.

Another possibility of understanding the double use of *selah* is to reread the term homiletically as from *salach*, to forgive.⁷⁸ Prior to the act of admission, Adam was engaged in self-examination that led to proper preparation to face G!d and acknowledge one’s wrongs to G!d. With the first *selah* Adam had on his mind, he was engaged in preparation for and hoped in the possibility of forgiveness. Following his admission and with the second *selah*, Adam felt a relief, a sense that he received Divine *s’lichah*, forgiveness. It is not coincidental that Jews today continue to prepare spiritually in a variety of ways to face G!d on Yom Kippur for any wrongs for which they have not yet verbally acknowledged.

⁷⁷ *Mikra’ot*, III.21a. See more on this below, 98. This Targum is neither that of Onkelos or Pseudo-Jonathan. While similar to the latter, it appears to represent a later writing.

⁷⁸ See Friedlander, 147.

Today the period of time for preparation is forty days, not forty-nine—and those forty days remind the Jew of the time Moses went up to receive on behalf of the people the second set of tablets and return with this gift, which occurred on Yom Kippur. This period of preparation is known by far more Jews and for far longer than this midrash. This period of preparation includes the recitation of Selihot, liturgical poems, not unlike Psalms—and some rituals incorporate Psalms—that intend and prepare us to seek G'd's reconciled Presence and/or Divine forgiveness. Any such affirmation or forgiveness we receive means that such affirmation/forgiveness is once and for all, not just a temporary one, and that the wrongdoing no longer counts and can no longer be brought up, because the affirmation/forgiveness of G'd is both “in this world” and “in the world to come.”

Va-avoni lo chisiti/My distortedness I do not hide

I understand this as “I have finished hiding my distortion,” that is, the psalmist has decided to no longer rationalize the pernicious behavior with excuses to G'd or even within the self.⁷⁹ The psalmist had to come to this place of deep self-realization, asking with pointed truthfulness what Job asks rhetorically:⁸⁰

Im **kisiti** ch'adam p'sha'ay lit-mon b'chubi **avoni**.
Did I **hide**, like Adam, my defiances,
Burying in my bosom **my distortedness**?

The psalmist's experience both before and after admission testifies to the truth of Prv 28:13:

M'chase f'sha'av lo yats-li-ach; mode v'ozev y'rucham.
The one who covers one's defiances will not succeed;

⁷⁹ See A. A. Anderson, 257.

⁸⁰ Jb 31:33.

the one who acknowledges and forsakes (one's wrongful behavior) will experience compassion.

Both just cited passages share the verbs of the psalmist, "to cover." They also both use the plural of *pesha*, "defiance," one of the three terms for acting out of synch with one's potential that our psalmist uses.⁸¹

Amarti/I hereby declare

As I have contended, internal acknowledgement or private remorse, counseling with but only within the self, exhibiting inklings of what we feel deeply or hints that we know that we did wrong without quite owning up to our truth or the facts, or pretending as if we feel quite ready to move forward in relationship with another person without actually offering acknowledgment and inviting the needed conversation do not constitute admission for the psalmist.⁸² The silence must be broken in the presence of another, the other, the Other. For this reason, the NJPS translation "I resolve" seems most inadequate,⁸³ for it leaves the reader with the sense that the process is, or could be, entirely internal.⁸⁴ "I resolve" can mean "I hope to at some point in the future."

In my view, to leave this as a possible understanding of *amarti* misses the power of the text. This verb comes at the end of a three-verb sequence: *o-di-a, lo chisiti, amarti*, "I acknowledge, I no longer hide, I hereby declare." I have already discussed the three-word sequence of nouns for wrongdoing and the three-word sequence for forgiveness that opens our psalm. The three-verb sequence here to indicate the psalmist's admission, then, mediates the other

⁸¹ V. 1.

⁸² See Mays, 146.

⁸³ JPS, 1147.

⁸⁴ Levine, 97-98, notices this as well.

two. The climax of the sequence can hardly be something like “I resolved,” something that the psalmist has merely decided within the psalmist’s thought when the entire point is that verbal admission clears and cleanses the soul. Furthermore, as a few scholars point out, this verb stands in contrast to verse 3, “I kept silent.”⁸⁵ Coming at the end of a three-verb sequence, this *amarti* becomes the very dramatic personal and internal breakthrough that this psalmist finally is able to make.

The use of *amarti* that I am proposing here is not unusual. In fact, Delitzsch already notes that in the previous psalm,⁸⁶ the psalmist employs the same verb when “looking back upon some fact of” the psalmist’s “spiritual life.”⁸⁷ In that psalm, physical suffering, personal enemies, and social isolation (vv.10-13) lead the psalmist to the astounding declaration of “*amarti: Elohy ata*,” “I hereby declare: My G!d—is You!” In the context of that psalm, and with the circumstances of a ravaged life, such an affirmation startles us. Then, too, whatever our anguish and sufferings, and whatever their causes, we must wonder if that is an affirmation we could make.

Here in our psalm, the declaration also startles us—even if we saw it coming. The psalmist did not know about the psalmist’s own inner fortitude. The psalmist’s acknowledgment, evoked after so much time, and at the end of the three-verb sequence, seems to indeed astound even the psalmist. We, too, in our sufferings, need to learn or at least remind ourselves about the nature of our

⁸⁵ See, for example, Mays, 147.

⁸⁶ Ps 31:15.

⁸⁷ Delitzsch, 251.

own fortitude and courage, and if we can arrive at the place the psalmist eventually does: the place of honesty in our relations with G!d, people and community, the comfort within ourselves that allows us to place ourselves in a position of open vulnerability with others. We, too, might be startled to realize that we have this strength within us.

Verse 2c proleptically informs us that no “*r’miyah*,” “deceit,” can reside in our spirit. Because the compunctious person contains no *r’miyah* in their being, no *r’miyah* can reside in their acknowledgment. While vulnerability and wrongdoing may be a real part of every life, that very fact does not excuse any act of refusal to invite the needed conversation but rather suggests that every such act should be accompanied by admission. If the admission is to bear integrity, it must be made with integrity. However, this is more difficult than it may appear, and for a very good reason. To paraphrase and develop Mays’ thought, because the admission of errant journeying is the act of an errant journeyer, it may be itself erroneous or wrong—done in the wrong way, in the wrong tone, to the wrong party, at the wrong time.⁸⁸ Similarly, when one has neglected or postponed sharing important information about oneself or the feelings one has, then one can often bears a feeling of “wrongfulness.”

Mays reminds us that St. Augustine, commenting on this psalm, three times warns, “Do not claim the right” to inner peace “on the grounds of your own justice, nor the right to do wrong on the grounds of G!d’s mercy.”⁸⁹ That is, we should not allow the fact of our admission, and all the work that went into making

⁸⁸ Mays, 147.

⁸⁹ Augustine, *St. Augustine on the Psalms*, ed. and trans. Scholastica Hebgin and Felicitas Corrigan, 2 vols. (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), 30/62-4. Quoted in Mays, 147.

our admission, to become a sign or a badge—to others or ourselves—of our personal rightness. This is the way of *r'miyah*.

Sometimes people approach the person they injured and acknowledge their lives with the expectation that that person will of course extend gladsome support. Likewise, people sometimes admit the scope of a hurtful action with an expectation that the aggrieved party will easily forgive. If so, we make the practice of reconciliation and restoration into something rather shallow, inconsequential, a mere formality, lacking in seriousness and admitting of no potential for holy encounter.⁹⁰ It becomes an act, not of sanctity, but of sanctimony. Such an approach toward G!d presumes G!d must forgive rather easily, even casually, and that grace is cheap. Furthermore, people mislead G!d or the person to whom they have offered personal admission with a presentation of themselves as residing in a particular emotional and spiritual space that is not accurate. G!d, and perhaps any person they so address, will see through the charade and feel an additional, deeper hurt, as it were. Trust in the relationship becomes even harder to reestablish when one has not acted trustworthily.

Whether or not a person will extend affirmation or forgiveness is not something people can actually know ahead of time. Nor is it something that can enter into people's calculations or that people should enter into with personal motives. Rather, people need to acknowledge and admit openly and fully for two reasons: because they are or did something that requires them, qua *them*, to make acknowledgment and admission so that they might transform their "I" into

⁹⁰ Mays, 148.

something resembling “wholeness” again and because they recognize that taking ownership of their personal feelings or actions requires them to address them to the extent that they can. The person makes it much harder for the other party from whom one dearly hopes for affirmation or forgiveness to truly do so when one does not easily or quickly find the heart ready to admit.

At the other end of the spectrum, one sometimes does not offer acknowledgment to the party, whether G!d or human, because one has decided that that special other (or Other) will never give us affirmation or extend to us forgiveness, either because we feel that what we have become is not embraceable, that what we did was not forgivable or that the other person will remain entrenched in an obstinate posture. If the former, we must, as part of our self-examination process get in touch once again with our own self-worth, the part of us that is indeed godly, that part that constitutes G!d’s very own Image. While above I mentioned that Greenberg reminds us of this with regard to the one suffering physically,⁹¹ it becomes at least as important for the person struggling with emotional and spiritual issues. For it is possible that one’s feelings of low self-esteem contribute to the notion that someone will remain entrenched in their unwillingness to affirm or forgive. However, the one wanting to hope for affirmation or forgiveness is precisely the one who remains entrenched: the person has not yet even engaged the other party, let alone given an acknowledgment or sought forgiveness. That person has no actual idea of whether her/his words now will or will not be well-received. And so one must ask one’s own self: Why do I project onto someone I have not yet even approached a

⁹¹ See above, 80.

posture of intractability? By merely asking the question one may realize that one's entrenchment, no matter how it is couched, actually goes against one's professed hope for affirmation or forgiveness. For many, this low regard for self started long before any one specific episode; it can be a life-long journey. For others, just one episode, badly handled, can place us, at least temporarily, in such a negative self-view. The need to get back on the right path that leads directly to one's essential self must go through the place of acknowledgment and admission to the ones one has hurt.

Ode aleil admit

Some manuscripts read *ode alai*, "I make admission against myself."⁹² Such a reading emphasizes, perhaps, the difficulty for each of us to actually admit where we did not live up to our best. The discomfort may be felt most keenly and deeply not when we suffer because of our refusal to make admission and not the point where we resolve to acknowledge, but at the very moment we actually do make admission. Such a reading, additionally, describes how one's negative view of one's self-worth can affect one's self-examination and one's approach to the injured party, including one's body posture, one's tone and one's wording. If such a reading were maintained, it would suggest that the psalmist, even with all this negativity, possessed innate courage and strength that the psalmist did not even realize. Even while trembling, we can evince tremendous positive growth. Sometimes that comes by stating, "It was I and not a seraph; it was I and no other."⁹³

⁹² See *BHS*, 1113.

⁹³ Paraphrasing the words of the Passover *Haggadah*.

P'sha'ay/My defiances

Some manuscripts read *pish'i*, “my defiance” or “my rebellion,” using the singular. This would not represent a change in the consonantal text but merely a re-pointing of it. In this reading, the psalmist admits the wrongdoing. The use of the plural, however, points to a greater spiritual truth. Whatever “rebellion” that the psalmist committed was compounded by the psalmist’s refusal to take ownership of the deed and of the subsequent moral responsibility to make admission and make amends. Thus, the original misdeed was compounded by an even greater misdeed, the “rebellion” against oneself and against G!d that occurs when one refuses to rectify the problem and live as if one did not put out negativity into someone’s world and into the universe. Thus, in this reading the psalmist’s verbal acknowledgment and admission directly to the injured party lets that other party know that the psalmist has given good consideration to this, has taken this all in and has grown from struggling with and through it. My translation of “defiances” helps reconsider and broaden the potential meaning of *pesha* in context, for it seems to me that the psalmist intends the word to encompass both the original act and the subsequent cover-up. If anything, the translation of “defiance” signifies both behavior and attitude and therefore allows for this broader expanse of meaning.

Avon chatati/The distortedness of my straying

Some commentators seem troubled by this phrase that brings two synonymous terms for wrongdoing together. Some handle this by understanding

the phrase, along with the NIV, as “the guilt of my sin.”⁹⁴ The New English Bible interprets as “the penalty of my sin.” Others still follow Duhm in emending the final *Selah* to *salah-ta*, thereby yielding *nasata avon; chatati salahta*, “You carried away (my) distortion; my straying You forgave.”⁹⁵ This makes for a simpler and less complicated reading, but it does not thereby render such an emendation correct, especially with the lack of any support in the manuscripts and versions.

All of these attempts to deal with the text, in my view, remain off-target and seem unnecessary. I have already shown how Brueggemann points to the chiasmic structure of the five nouns indicating errant life journeying in this verse.⁹⁶ In addition, however, I see these last two items in the list of five, the only ones brought together in *s’michut* (“compound”) form, as the culmination of the list and hence brought together for tremendous effect. This series loses enormous potency and impact when one interprets the final two of the series in a way that de-emphasizes such stacking of terms. Instead, this line of interpretation places focus on either the emotional load of guilt (“the guilt of my straying”) or, alternatively, on some later legal or other consequence of the wrongdoing (“the penalty for my straying”). One should well wonder why the text would pack these nouns of wrongdoing into one verse if one wasn’t to focus completely on it. It makes greater sense to read the final two nouns along the lines of Radak:⁹⁷

S’michut “avon” l’“chatati” l’godel “chatati.”
The joining of “twistedness” to “my straying” denotes the magnitude of “my straying.”

⁹⁴ VanGemeren, 272-3.

⁹⁵ See A. A. Anderson, 257, where no citation is given for Duhm’s proposal.

⁹⁶ See above, 76.

⁹⁷ Rosenberg, 112.

That is, the two verbs, which come as the final of a series of five, mutually impact upon and heighten each other's meaning, so that either the psalmist finally gains recognition (a "click" moment) that the errant journeying, however understood, was more than something merely unpleasant and rather unexceptionable, or, alternatively, that the psalmist now realizes that the psalmist has compounded the original act adversely by withholding acknowledgment; the wrongfulness of the action was exacerbated by the wrongfulness of inaction. This results in a further strain in the relationship, a further diminishing of one's character, and a further worsening of one's self-esteem. My translation, "the distortion of my straying" allows all these possibilities to emerge in one's reflection of this compound phrase, in context.

Selah/...

The Targum on Psalms here translates the term *selah* with the plural *l'al-min*, "for eternities," while in the other two instances, following v.4 and following v.7, it uses the more common singular form, *l'al-ma*, "for eternities."⁹⁸ Clearly, if something is designated "for eternity," it is "forever," and there can be no more. This explains why the plural appears much less frequently, but it also begs an explanation. Here, the psalmist re-affirms the self and encourages others to understand that the affirmation or forgiveness attained, the joy it afforded and the personal growth that enabled all this to occur, were not fleeting, provisional or transient but, rather, deep, transformative and permanent.

Excursus 4: The Artistry of Acknowledgment—

Abraham, Our Psalmist, and Moses

⁹⁸ *Mikra'ot*, 3:21a.

Exodus Rabbah,⁹⁹ too, reflects the same type of thinking.¹⁰⁰

All the exemplary came before the Holy Blessed One with artistry.... So David stated: "My straying I acknowledge to You, and my distortedness I know longer hide." At first David made acknowledgement to G!d of just one "straying" and just one act of "distortedness." At the end (of his admission), however, "You carried away the distortedness of my straying forever."

This brief midrash parses the wording of the acknowledgment and admission that the Psalmist makes here in our verse. In this reading, King David, the reputed author of this psalm, begins by acknowledging only a couple of very specific, discrete pieces of his role. The midrash thus interprets the singular noun *chatati*, "my straying" as "one particular act of straying" that David acknowledges and the noun *va-avoni*, "and my distortedness," as "one particular incidence of distortedness." Indeed, this midrash conceivably considers the "straying" and the "distortedness" as occurring in the very same act. The midrash makes clear, as we have stated, that the phrase *avon chatati*, "the distortedness of my straying" as indicating much more than merely the sum of its parts. This compound phrase, for the midrash, seems to indicate a larger complex of actions and inactions, feelings, repressions and consequences—the cosmic repercussions—that each act separately contains, both within the doer's interior emotional-spiritual life and throughout the universe, touching even one's relationship with G!d. Indeed, since *nasata avon chatati* ("You carried away the distortedness of my straying") seems to indicate a complete forgiveness on G!d's part, as

⁹⁹ Written between the ninth and eleventh centuries, this midrash combines two separate works, a line-by-line commentary on the first ten chapters of the book of Exodus with a series of homilies on chs. 12-40.

¹⁰⁰ *Sefer Midrash Rabbah* [The Great Midrash], Vilna ed., 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Pe'er HaTorah, 1979), 1:77b. See S. M. Lehrman, *Exodus*, Vol. 3 of *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, 3rd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 544.

indicated by the rabbinic understanding of *selah* as “forever,” this forgiveness must also include all of King David’s *p’sha-ay*, literally, “defiances” that remain in the center of the verse.

Mirkin misses the impact, asserting instead that the plural form *p’sha-ay*, “my defiances,” serves as the fulcrum of the midrash.¹⁰¹ This can hardly be the case. Not only does the brief midrash never mention or hint that the word *p’sha-ay* has any relevance, but, rather, the midrash is quite specific contrasting the words *chatati* and *va-avoni*, on the one hand, with the phrase *avon chatati*, on the other.

Clearly this wording is the “artistry” that the midrash is presenting in its list of “exemplary ones” (*tsaddikim*) who use great “artistry” in addressing the Holy One. That list includes Abraham, David and Moses, in that order. That David is out of chronological order suggests that the brief midrash we have examined is crucial to the larger midrash’s self-presentation. It strains credulity, as Mirkin would have us believe, to consider that the tremendous artistry of the verse for this midrash depends upon the contrast of the plural form *p’sha’ay* with the singular forms *chatati* and *va-avoni* and then forgets to mention or even hint at the word *p’sha’ay* and, instead, throws out the red herring of *avon chatati* as the crucial factor, which has nothing to do with the proposed “artistry.” Rather, David’s artistry is that the singular forms *chatati* and *avoni* mean something much more—and much more profound—when placed in *s’michut*, juxtaposition, even though in this compound formulation each term still remains in the singular.

¹⁰¹ Moses Arye Mirkin, *Midrash Rabbah* [The Great Midrash], critical ed., 11 vols (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1973), 2:187-88.

Finally, when taking in the achievement of the psalmist's artistry of using this particular phrasing of the verse wherein $(a + b)$ leads to $(a \times b)$, we can learn something further. In making one's acknowledgment to G'd, so this *midrash*, David did not merely offer a glib "I'm sorry about that." Rather, David began by offering, one by one, specific examples of where David hurt the Holy One, as it were—*chatati* and *va-avoni*. Later, in David's admission, David felt more comfortable and realized that G'd was listening and receptive and so David could start an outpouring—*p'sha-ay*—a plural form perhaps indicating that these were given in one fell swoop without as much detailing as David did in the beginning of the conversation. It may be true that if we make acknowledgment by some formula as "I regret all that I did," that we might indeed have both all the specific incidents as well as a whole spectrum of postures and attitudes in mind, but to the one listening the lack of any specificity at all may indeed come off glib and not appear as if we fully appreciate the extent of the repercussions of our misdeed. Then, too, if we try to mention too many things at once, without specificity and without taking a breath, we might overwhelm the party to whom we are trying to express our contrition by bringing up, in one fell swoop, the memory of so much hurt that we have inflicted. David's example of going carefully one by one until, at least within this conversation, some sense that the hurt party is within our emotional orbit, remains a solid "artistic" approach, emotionally and spiritually.

The importance of verbal articulation:

The Work of Milgrom

My reading of this psalm finds support in the work of Jacob Milgrom, who finds that admission of wrongdoing in the Priestly layer of the Pentateuch (Torah), known as P, must be verbalized.¹⁰² He finds that the root *y-d-h* originally meant “to declare.” He notes that this root can stand alone or may be followed by the preposition *al*, as it does in the key v. 5 of our psalm, and thus argues that this indicates that the act of admission has independent importance and may thus be dissociated from the cult. Further, Milgrom cites passages to show that the individual sometimes did actually recite such admission.¹⁰³ For Milgrom, then, when P ascribes such admission to an individual, it always indicates that the individual had to personally recite the admission, rather than a priest acting on the individual’s behalf. This, for Milgrom, is supported by the wording in Lv 5:5 that first the person must offer such admission and only then bring the sacrifice to the Temple. Finally, Milgrom concludes, on the basis of Lv 5:20-26, that the admission must be made directly to the “injured party,” whether human, Divine or both,¹⁰⁴ since it is the actual act that counts and not just the intention to do an act. Admission in thought alone, then, is inadequate.¹⁰⁵ Our psalmist’s open, direct, and public acknowledgment and admission here, then, seem continuous with other parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Milgrom demonstrates that the admission becomes a potent element of the ancient Israelite judicial system as well.¹⁰⁶ It only occurs, at least in P, when

¹⁰² Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, vol. 3A (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 301. Milgrom’s work does not deal with the broader issue of sharing of self.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 302. The passages cited include 1 Sm 7:6 and Ezr 10:1.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 303.

¹⁰⁵ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, Continental Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 50.

deliberate acts may be redressed through sacrifice. This means that admission serves as “the legal device fashioned by the Priestly legislators to convert deliberate sins into inadvertences, thereby qualifying them for sacrificial expiation.” Indeed, in the case of desecrating G!d’s name, for example, the act of admission “commutes the death sentence imposed by the heavenly court.”¹⁰⁷ This is precisely what I find in my exploration of Cain’s admission and G!d’s subsequent commutation of punishment.¹⁰⁸ The idea of admission and the power of admission became recognized in the legal realm, which usually occurs because of its importance in other areas, such as culture and religion.

Milgrom comes to similar conclusions when discussing Nm 5:5-8.¹⁰⁹ Verbal articulation to hurt persons and to G!d must precede any bringing of sacrifice. Milgrom suggests that this passage represents an addendum to the passages in Leviticus.¹¹⁰ That this passage could not be incorporated into Leviticus, Milgrom argues, indicates that for this legislator, the book of Leviticus was already closed. Further, Milgrom deduces that both texts must be pre-exilic, due to considerations of language and the fact that sacrifice must be offered.¹¹¹

To articulate remorse is to do more than feel it. Clearly the ability to articulate helps one to organize what are often times somewhat inchoate feelings. To do so, as our psalmist did, in a public forum to G!d, requires

¹⁰⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 301-2, 369, 373 and idem., *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 46.

¹⁰⁷ Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 58.

¹⁰⁸ See “Excursus 1: Cain and our Psalmist” above, 41-45.

¹⁰⁹ See Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 34-36, 302, and 396-98.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 302.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 398.

preparation—emotional and spiritual in addition to logistical and rhetorical. This process helps the person to gain greater clarity about all the potential consequences and repercussions of one's actions and one's behavior. This assists the person by enabling them to begin formulating plans and strategies to try to eliminate further hurt or damage by rectifying what has already occurred to the degree possible, offering reparations, preparing to ask for forgiveness, standing humbly before the injured party to offer our contrition, to work toward restoration of the relationship, and to try to mend those parts of the self that enabled one to hurt another party, so that one can avoid such negative behavior in the future. All of this gains sharper focus through the process leading to and including admission and therefore becomes more efficacious to the degree that one not only recognizes and admits to something one did badly but takes the time for deeper self-reflection that acknowledgment and admission can and should entail.

Verbal Articulation and Jewish Tradition

Jewish tradition maintained the importance of verbal articulation as a priority in the process of *teshuvah* ("restoration"). Saadiah Ga'on in the ninth century endorses such in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, the first formal attempt to present a systematic Jewish theology.¹¹²

The tenth [category of person] is the one who turns [their life around] by conducting the self through the [various] elements [literally, "fences"] of restoration, and the elements of restoration are four: abandonment,

¹¹² Saadiah Gaon, *Sefer Emunot v'De'ot*, ed. by Rabbi Joseph Qafih, web edition processed by Yehuda Eisenberg (Jerusalem: The Press Institute for Sura), 5:5, <http://www.daat.ac.il/daat/mahshevt/kepah/5-2.htm>, accessed October 20, 2009. See Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt, Yale Judaica Series, v. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 220.

remorse, the request for forgiveness and the resolve to not go back [down that road] again.

Saadia does not elaborate on how these steps should be taken.

“Abandonment” refers to ending the stasis or otherwise refraining from deleterious behavior. This step does not seem to require any verbalization. The same might also apply to the fourth step, the “resolve” not to get oneself involved in the same quandary again. However, Saadia’s third step, the “request for forgiveness,” certainly implies a direct verbal plea to the One, and any persons that one needs to address. In regard to Saadia’s second step, one could similarly infer that one’s “regret” must be made manifest in some palpable way. Verbal articulation would be the most obvious method to satisfy such a requirement.

Ibn Pakuda¹¹³ reiterates all four of Saadia’s steps in the process of restoration in his ethical treatise, *Chovot Halevavot* [The Heart’s Obligations].¹¹⁴

However, the elements of restoration are four. The first is remorse for all that arose before him from the distortions. The second is that one should abandon them by turning [aside] from them. The third is that one should admit them and seek pardon with regard to them. The fourth is that one should authorize on one’s life that one will not do them again in one’s heart or in one’s conscious thought.

I notice here that ibn Pakuda reverses the order of Saadia’s first two steps. This suggests that for ibn Pakuda one must go through the internal processes in order to feel remorse before one can commit to not going down a particular

¹¹³ Bachya Ibn Pakuda, often referred to as Rabbeinu Bachya, lived in the first half of the eleventh century in Saragossa, Spain. Little is known of his life.

¹¹⁴ Bachya ibn Pakuda, *Chovot Hal’vavot* [The Heart’s Obligations], ed. Judah Eisenberg, 7:4, <http://www.daat.ac.il/data/mahshevt/hovot/7-2.htm> (accessed October 23, 2009). Chap. 7 is translated in Leonard S. Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, eds. and transs., *The Journey of the Soul: Traditional Sources on Teshuvah* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), chap. 4, “*Chovot Halevavot* (Duties of the Heart): The Seventh Gate: The Gate of Repentance,” 175-89. *Chovot Hal’vavot* represents the first systematic Jewish ethical treatise.

wayward path. Apparently, ibn Pakuda feels that only through understanding one's feelings can one experience compunction. Ibn Pakuda apparently feels that only the compunctious person will stop in their tracks and try to redirect the self onto a better course.

Unlike Saadiah, ibn Pakuda explains each of the four steps. Remorse, the first step, includes the recognition that the wayward behavior demeaned the self (*g'nut ma'aseihu*). Ibn Pakuda specifically states that such feelings must be made "manifest" to the other party, ostensibly through verbal articulation. With the third stage, Ibn Pakuda specifically calls for acknowledgment, again implying strongly that only direct verbal articulation can satisfy this inner ethical requirement. Ibn Pakuda speaks of rendering such acknowledgment both to G!d and to appropriate person(s). Ibn Pakuda understands the process as so powerful that twice he asserts that when one offers acknowledgment humbly that the other party/the Other cannot help but extend the heart in order to restore the relationship.

Rambam,¹¹⁵ too, requires verbal acknowledgment to both G!d and others in his legal code, the *Mishneh Torah* [Restatement of Torah].¹¹⁶

K'she-ya'aseh t'shuvah v'yashuv mei-chatato, chayav l'hit-vadot lif-nei he-El baruch Hu, she-ne-mar, "Ish o ishah ki ya-asu ... v'hit-vadu et chatatam asher asu." Ze vidui d'varim.... Keitsad mit-vadin? Omer, "Ana HaShem, chatati, aviti, pasahti l'fanecha, v'asiti kach v'chach. V'harei nichamti u-

¹¹⁵ **Rambam** (1135-1204) is the acronym of **Rabbi Moses ben (or bar) Maimon**, also known as (Moses) Maimonides, was a rabbi, physician and philosopher who promoted and developed a Jewish neo-Aristotelian. He lived in Cordoba, Spain and, later, Morocco and Egypt.

¹¹⁶ Rambam [Rabbi Moses bar Maimon Maimonides], *Mishneh Torah hu HaYad HaChazakah* [The Restatement of Torah, or The Strong Hand], Warsaw-Vilna edition (Jerusalem: HaMesorah, 1982), Hilchot T'shuvah [The Laws of Restoration] 1:1, 51b-52a. Hilchot T'shuvah is translated in Leonard S. Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, transs. and eds., *The Journey of the Soul: Traditional Sources on Teshuvah*, Chap. 6 (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), 229-67.

vosh-ti b'ma'asay, u-l'olam eini chozer l'davar ze." V'zehu ikaro shel vidui. V'chawl ha-marbe l'hit-vadot u-ma-arich b'inyan ze—harei ze m'shubach.... V'chen ha-chovel b'chaveiro v'ha-mazik mamono—af al pi she-shilem lo ma she hu chayav lo—eino mit-kaper ad she-yit-vade.

When one seeks restoration and returns from one's straying, one is obligated to make acknowledgment before the One Blessed G'd, as it states,¹¹⁷ "When a man or woman does [any kind of straying ... he or she] must acknowledge the straying." This connotes a verbal acknowledgment. How does one acknowledge? The person states, "O G'd, I strayed, I distorted, I was defiant before You and I did such-and-such. I do feel badly, I am ashamed of my actions. I will never do this again." This is the essence of acknowledgment. The one who expands on this and details their acknowledgment does something praiseworthy.... Similarly, the one who injures another person physically or monetarily, even though one pays proper restitution, does not receive expiation until he or she makes acknowledgment.

This represents the beginning of Rambam's discussion and legal presentation of *teshuvah* ("restoration"). I am drawn to consider the importance that Rambam attaches to verbal articulation. He opens Hilchot Teshuvah not by reiterating the four aspects of restoration posited by Saadiah and elaborated upon by ibn Pakuda. Rather, he posits the centrality to the process of *teshuvah* of verbal articulation. Even when discussing later the idea of remorse, Rambam contends that "one needs to acknowledge with one's lips and state these matters that one arrived at in one's heart."¹¹⁸ Rambam continues to amplify the importance of verbal articulation. So, for example, he discusses in 2:5 how much detail should one include in one's acknowledgment.¹¹⁹

Schweid confidently states that it was Rambam who "clearly shifted confession from embodiment in the ritual act toward an orientation of

¹¹⁷ Nm 5:6-7.

¹¹⁸ Rambam 2:2, 52b.

¹¹⁹ I refer to this in my discussion of this issue. See below, 119-31. Rambam's understanding of this issue is referenced below, 131, fn. 163.

psychological and moral repentance.”¹²⁰ However, Psalm 32 suggests that acknowledgment indeed formed the centerpiece for *teshuvah* and personal growth. Milgrom's discussion further suggests that the dramatic ritual, even from the beginning, was no mere end in itself but merely a symbol of the emotional and spiritual growth at which the person arrived. It thereby gave powerful affirmation to the individual in moving forward with this new frame for the person to understand the self as she or he takes up again the life journey in a positive way. Thus it seems to me that Rambam's focus on verbal acknowledgment is not so much a “shift” as it is a grounding of the Hebrew Bible's presentation of *teshuvah*, and its understanding of the human need for verbal articulation, and the human need to have some one, or some One, listen, and brings this all together into a systematic legal presentation.

In this Rambam is true to his code's title, as *Mishneh Torah* connotes a “restatement” of what is in the Torah. The word “restate” means, “to state again or in a new way,”¹²¹ and this is precisely what Rambam does by remaining faithful to the content, the context and the thinking of the Hebrew Bible in his careful and creative “restatement.”

Indeed, rather than a “shift,” one might think of Rambam's efforts as a clarification. As I have shown, previous writers, in thinking through the biblical text and the idea of restoration, found four main elements in it. Anyone reading those texts in isolation could well infer that all elements are equal in importance.

¹²⁰ Eliezer Schweid, *The Experience of Jewish Time: Philosophical Dimensions of the Jewish Holy Days*, trans. Amnon Hadary (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2000), 80. See “Yom Kippur: Confession, Atonement, and Repentance,” Ch. 4, 80.

¹²¹ restatement. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/restatement> (accessed October 28, 2009).

Rambam's presentation need not be seen as necessarily "new" or some "shift" but, rather, as ensuring that the core of the biblical emphasis on verbal articulation of one's heart to both G'd and others who matter does not get short shrift in anyone's personal journeying. This may receive some support perhaps in looking at Rambam's construction of the formula for acknowledgment. He chooses not merely one but three verbs, *chatati*, *aviti* and *pashati*. These three verbs are precisely the three that the psalmist uses in v.5, and they are in precisely the same order.

Greenberg succinctly and pithily renders Rambam's entire presentation of *teshuvah* to the "three Rs" of regret, rejection and resolution.¹²² The evidence I present suggests that such reductionism errs gravely by bypassing Rambam's clear concern for each person to articulate their voice to G'd and appropriate persons.

Thinkers after Rambam also iterate the necessity for verbal articulation. Gerondi¹²³ in the thirteenth century lists acknowledgment as the fourteenth of his twenty principles.¹²⁴ He differs from all others in recommending that one should mention not only one's own missteps in life but those of one's ancestors. This may suggest that one must think about how one's life history has affected and continues to affect one's life journey and how one goes about journeying. Along with others, though, he does insist that verbal articulation precedes any

¹²² Irving Greenberg, *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Touchstone, 1988), 203-04.

¹²³ Yonah ben Avraham Gerondi (d. 1263), known as Rabbeinu Yonah or Yonah of Gerona, was a Catalan rabbi and moralist. The first section of the book is translated in Kravitz and Olitzky, 191-227.

¹²⁴ Rabbi Yonah Gerondi, *Sha'arei T'shuvah* [The Gates of Restoration] (Vilna: Drukarnia-wydawnicza, 1927), 7b, <http://www.daat.ac.il> (accessed October 27, 2009).

experience of restoration:

If one pained another person or damaged them, or embarrassed them, or spoke about them to diminish them, one cannot experience expiation until one seeks forgiveness from that person.... It is fitting for the one owning the process of restoration (*ba'al teshuvah*) to do so before offering acknowledgment [to G!d] so that the acknowledgment will be acceptable.

Aboav¹²⁵ in the fourteenth century suggests that the making of acknowledgment following one's inventory of the self constitutes the minimum amount necessary to be considered a viable process of *teshuvah*:¹²⁶

"If anyone is remorseful and wants to rectify a misdeed, let that person make acknowledgment. One does not have to bring any other offering or seek any other method. Remorse alone and oral admission [are sufficient].

Albo¹²⁷ in the fifteenth century contends that the successful *teshuvah* process consists of three basic elements, namely, a "repair of thought, speech, and action."¹²⁸ The change in one's thought is explained as "acknowledging one's defiance(s),"¹²⁹ but Albo does not elaborate further. However, his three elements could well represent a succinct framing of the three stages posited by Psalm 32:5, namely, awareness, acknowledgement, and going public in order to model and teach the life lesson.

I have just briefly surveyed texts from throughout the Middle Ages, when thinkers tried to understand, assimilate, and organize biblical, rabbinic and other materials into a coherent, systematic presentation. The materials I looked at

¹²⁵ Isaac Aboav was a Talmud scholar in Spain. He is also known as the M'norat Ha-Ma'or, from the title of his most famous work.

¹²⁶ Isaac Aboav, "*Menorat Hamaor* (Lamp of Light)," in Kravitz and Olitzky, 23. The word "Hamaor" should read "Hamaor."

¹²⁷ Joseph Albo, c.1380-1444, was a Spanish rabbi and philosopher.

¹²⁸ Joseph Albo, *Sefer Ha-'Ikkarim: Book of Principles*, trans. and ed. Isaac Husik, critical ed., 4 vols, The Schiff Library of Jewish Classics (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), 4:1, 235.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 236.

come from the ninth through fifteenth centuries and include philosophical, ethical, moral, and legal texts. I find consensus on the need for verbal articulation of one's deeply felt concerns to both God and significant persons as a key component, perhaps the key component, of the human process of spiritual and psychological growth wherein people need to engage in self-reflection and self-examination in order to understand where they are in their life journey. When one finds by doing so that one has let down oneself or someone, or some One, else, the Jewish tradition as a whole strongly commends verbal articulation of one's heart.

Written Articulation: The Work of

Dr. James Pennebaker

Judaism is surely not the only faith to incorporate the notion that offering verbal and direct acknowledgment is "cleansing," that is, cathartic. Science, too, has for decades done work that affirms the value of articulation of one's acknowledgment.

Dr. James Pennebaker of the University of Texas in Austin, beginning in the mid-1980s, showed that having people write about emotional upheavals for as little as fifteen minutes a day for three or four days could produce dramatic improvements in people's physical and mental health.¹³⁰ Dr. Pennebaker had people in a test group write down their deepest thoughts and feelings about traumatic, painful, or disturbing events of the past or present compared with a

¹³⁰ "Spotlight Archives: James Pennebaker, Ph. D.," College of Liberal Arts, Psychology Department, University of Texas, Austin, http://www.psy.utexas.edu/psy/spotlights/pennebaker_spot.html (accessed March 9, 2010). See also Chiel and Dreher, 75.

control group who wrote about trivial subjects. The text group not only suffered fewer illnesses, but their immune cells were also livelier and more responsive than before.

His experiments, many times replicated, showed that such expression can indeed enhance immune function, improve grades among students, and help those who had lost their jobs to perform better on job interviews and thus enable them to return to work more quickly.¹³¹ Since his original publication on this topic in 1986, over 150 articles have been published or are in press using Professor Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm. This work is featured in textbooks in social, health, clinical, occupational, and personality psychology. In sum Dr. Pennebaker's work has confirmed what this psalm asserts: the healing power of communicating one's acknowledgment.

While the first stage of acknowledgment is to confide in oneself, Dr. Pennebaker's work suggests that such acknowledgement needs articulation in a specific forum for it to become curative. As Chiel and Dreher point out, "Only when we express our feelings can we overcome our isolation and heal the loneliness."¹³² We will minimally find tremendous relief in disclosing and sharing our feelings with someone or with some One. To the degree that our admission and feelings resonate with the other party, then we should at least find that a path toward deeper mutual understanding and reconciliation is now possible to forge. Further, to the degree that we discover that our admission and feelings

¹³¹ See James Pennebaker, *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997); and *Emotion, Disclosure and Health* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2002).

¹³² Chiel and Dreher, 75-76.

have little resonance with the other party and therefore may not have been entirely based in any reality other than our own (Chiel and Dreher's "imaginary transgression"), we shall greatly benefit from learning and taking in the awareness that we might not have otherwise been able to gain and experience fuller release from and fuller relief of the undue burden by recognizing this deeper truth, both within our own hearts and in the eyes of G'd. Moreover, we shall be pointed toward the road of greater personal growth by knowing that we must explore why we take on too much that is not ours to assume.

Hence, releasing ourselves from the grip of unhealthful feelings, especially shame and unhealthy guilt, is essential to healing. The process toward that goal consists of "accepting our weaknesses and vulnerabilities, acknowledging our true responsibilities, and rejecting the punishing voices of undeserved guilt."¹³³ We need to confront—fully, directly and honestly—ourselves, with all of our feelings, in whatever combination: shame, guilt, fear, anger, sadness, loneliness.

In Dr. Pennebaker's studies, the subjects later reported that they felt not only relief but also resolution, a sense of peace regarding what they had confided. Psalm 32 captures the return to harmony and joy in the aftermath of confession. "You envelop me in euphoric refrains of rescue," for "loving kindness surrounds" those who do *teshuvah*.¹³⁴

Indirect Admission: Verbal or Written

We start to move toward resolution only when we first acknowledge and verbalize our anguish. If we are not yet ready to do so with the parties we have

¹³³ Ibid., 76.

¹³⁴ V. 7, 10.

hurt, we can at least find someone who can listen and empathize—a counselor, a rabbi, a therapist, a friend, a spouse. And prayer can be a vehicle for confiding our pain to G!d, even when such expression does not contain an admission.¹³⁵ A positive interim step is to seek out a supportive presence. For some, however, even that step is very difficult, for the burdens that we carry sometimes encompass shame and even self-loathing. It should come as no surprise, then, that nowadays a myriad of formats allow for some release through an indirect admission: newspaper advice columns, talk radio and now, through the internet—in chat rooms, for example. In addition, the web now boasts many sites devoted specifically to offering anonymous confessions.¹³⁶ In these forums, one has the opportunity to unburden oneself in the safety of anonymity to declare in a public way some misdeed one has committed. Yet because of the nature of such forums, any admission made in these formats will still fall short of the type of open and direct acknowledgment that the psalmist speaks of and models for us.

First in many of these forums, one does not really admit anything. Rather, one releases feelings. I looked at thirteen pages of “anonymous confessions” on July 15, 2009 on the website <http://www.experienceproject.com>. I did not find one posting that even looked like an admission that expresses remorse for a misdeed committed. I cite four examples, as they appeared:

MY STEPMOM IS A B@#CH! SHE IS JEALOUS OF ME I SWEAR- I HATE HER!!!!!!!!!!!!...she has always treated me and my brother different, she spoils her kids giving my step sister a credit card when she was 12, an

¹³⁵ Chiel and Dreher, 75.

¹³⁶ See, for example, <http://www.confessions.grouphug.us>, <http://www.unburdened.net>, <http://www.anonymousconfession.com>, <http://www.experienceproject.com/confessions.pohp>, <http://www.jusfess.com>, <http://www.droppedthebomb.com> and <http://www.roofessions.com>.

iphone, morimoto pearls, louis bag, etc etc and my dad has no clue....she is so fake!!!¹³⁷

I love being this drunk! im not drunk enough to feel sick to my stomach, but im drunk enough to not really feel anything. i love not caring about anything....i am at peace. i am numb. i am an invisible, stupid, piece of ****, when im not drunk. But when I have had a bottle of rum, i just don't care anymore...about anything. let me die now, in my sleep,...i don't care.¹³⁸

i lie to my therapist, my parents my friends about my eating disorder. i have gotten worse. i want to starve myself to death. i know it's sick. i know I'm sick. i would rather die than be fat. my friend became anorexic. she had so many friends and seemed to have it together and have everything. i associated thinness with love and success and fulfillment. Until i get that feeling I won't stop.¹³⁹

I am choosing to end my chemo after my next round. My doctor agreed that all chemo is going to do is prolong my life by a month of two. I know you want this to be fixed, I know you want me to live, I know you love me. I can't live like this though. I rather die as myself, then live life like this.¹⁴⁰

What powerful expressions of hurt, anger, loss, and more. What connects these to the psalmist is the need for expression, the desire to be heard. They are putting some of their feelings out to the Universe. While there may have been a touchstone episode of some misdeed or not, at some point acknowledgment and admission become for these people, as for the psalmist, beside the point. So much more has occurred in the time since such an ostensible moment—or between such moments—that has led to an agglomeration of emotional and spiritual feelings and needs that it remains truly difficult to disentangle all the threads and to reflect upon them so that some path can be forged that might

¹³⁷ "MY STEPMOM IS A B@#CHI (Family Secret)," July 14, 2009, <http://www.experienceproject.com/confessions.php> (accessed July 15, 2009).

¹³⁸ "Drunk (Embarrassing Secret)," July 14, 2009, <http://www.experienceproject.com/confessions.php> (accessed July 15, 2009).

¹³⁹ "Hunger (Health Secret)," July 14, 2009, <http://www.experienceproject.com/confessions.php?ct=health> (accessed July 15, 2009).

¹⁴⁰ "Bruise (Health Secret)," July 14, 2009, <http://www.experienceproject.com/confessions.php?ct=health> (accessed July 15, 2009).

ameliorate, let alone lift, the emotional-spiritual load.

We feel for each of these people, in different ways perhaps. These people need help, and we should love to reach out to them, but they do not appear emotionally available and spiritually ready to receive our help or loving kindness (*chesed*), for they have not undergone the kind of self-examination and growth that the psalmist evinces. Their acknowledgment and admission remain, at most, partial.

The only “I statement” that the first person makes is “I swear—I hate her” in reference to her stepmother. This is not someone taking responsibility for their part of the relationship. This person cannot state “*Va-avoni lo chisiti*,”¹⁴¹ “my distortedness I have not hidden,” for this one reveals nothing.

The others do make such “I statements” but each are not ready to get back on their life-path. The second author self-medicates to escape life and retains a miserable self-concept when sober and so covers up the task of facing oneself through alcohol. Of this person we cannot yet state that their life is “*k’sui chata’ah*,”¹⁴² that “their straying is re-tracked.” While this one tries to cover up life with alcohol, this “straying” from living a full life hits them whenever they are sober and remains all too obvious to anyone who might wish to be an important part of this one’s life. They continue to derail themselves.

The third writer admits to engaging in behavior that might suggest an addictive personality. This person’s acknowledgment of lying to everyone in life shows that we cannot yet state of this person “*ein b’rucho r’miyah*,”¹⁴³ “there

¹⁴¹ V. 5

¹⁴² V. 1

¹⁴³ V. 2.

remains in this one's life-spirit no deceit."

The fourth person seems to have come to some decision but is not yet ready to act on it. This person is postponing the necessary conversation with loved ones and, perhaps, the team of doctors until "after the next round." This one's needs *n'sui pesha*,¹⁴⁴ a "lifting of one's internal defiance," so that this one can invite the kind of holy conversations, particularly with loved ones, that can allow all of them to say goodbye to each other and live out whatever time this one has in this world as fully and richly as possible.

Minimally, the last three of these show physical deterioration that accompanies their pain. Nonetheless, like the psalmist, their pain is not primarily physical and the solution is not only medical. Indeed, the last person seems to have tried every available treatment modality. This person's reality challenges us to rethink what it might mean "to cure" someone.

None of these people, then, have done enough internal work so that they might now find themselves ready to claim ownership of their own lives. Their refusal to look at, integrate and learn from the past prevents them from having hope for the future and so their present feels heavy and miserable, like the psalmist who similarly remained silent, at first unaware of the problem and later refusing to deal with it.

Other problems remain with these types of communications about important concerns in one's heart. These "admissions" are done anonymously, so that no one knows who they are. Indeed, they do not seem to like their lives enough to

¹⁴⁴ V. 1.

tell us who they are. The admissions are made not to Gld specifically or to any one person; rather, they are placed in a forum where another anonymous person might or might not read them and might or might not respond. This is convenient. If no one responds, their low self-concept is affirmed. If one does reply, it may be a negative reply and that, too, will fortify the self in misery. Even positive, helpful responses can be gainsaid, since one may extrapolate that the anonymous person on the other side of the screen does not know them and their life, and so their advice remains only good for that other side of the screen, not theirs. Then, too, the anonymous sensitive person on the other side of the screen won't be the step-mother or other person who cannot be counted upon to respond with sensitivity. Then, too, there remains the danger that one might feel that this communication is all that should be needed or that one can possibly do. If so, this type of partial, anonymous admission may keep the person in stasis. Until one faces all important parties directly, including Gld, one will not have honored one's own self by taking one's personal issues seriously enough to do something constructive about them. Facing the other, we better live up to our best selves.

Even while we note the down side of such partial admissions, we must as well acknowledge that they might contain some positive aspects as well. First, such communications may be a first release of a lot of pent up energy. Further, the writing of such a communication can help one perceive the depths of one's plight. Then, too, one never knows if any particular response might touch something inside that can reactivate our desire to fight our own negative instincts. Finally, the release we get, perhaps with positive feedback, might

propel us to consider various options and forge our way back to our path. That path back must, at some point, include the fuller, more complete kind of conversation directly with and admission directly to the necessary parties, including G!d. Hopefully, the aftermath of such confrontations—internal and otherwise—will give us, like the psalmist, a much needed release, a better feeling about ourselves, a better perspective on life, and much cause for rejoicing.

How Much Admission Is Appropriate to Make?

Yoma, Ashamnu and Al Chet, and Psalm 19

We have explored psychic and spiritual pain from the time one discovers something important inside the self—whether it is unfinished business due to some deed one has committed or some secret about which one feels a need to confide in with someone. We can now concern ourselves with how much should one lay out when one offers an acknowledgment, admission or disclosure of something one holds inside deeply. On the one hand, one could tell the person everything that fills their heart, not merely in the interests of full disclosure but to express what one senses possible ramifications to be, especially as they appertain to the one we are addressing. On the other hand, one could be as brief as possible, admitting of few or no details, only referencing the concern in a very general way so that one does is not “dredging up the past” but merely sharing or apologizing for a burden that affects or concerns the other party. A discussion in the Babylonian Talmud highlights these two positions for us.¹⁴⁵

One needs to detail the straying, as the text implies: “Oh, please! This people strayed a great straying, and they made a golden god.”—So argues Rabbi Judah ben Baba.

¹⁴⁵ *Yoma* 86b.

Rabbi Akiba argues: “Evolving are those whose defiance is lifted, whose straying gets re-tracked.”

So, what, then, of what Moses declared, “...and they made a golden god”? It is in accordance with Rabbi Yannai, for Rabbi Yannai argued: “Moses declared before the Holy Blessed One, ‘Will of the Universe! Silver and gold You increased for Israel until they declared, ‘Enough!’” —It caused them “and they made a golden god.”

This interesting text begins by stating to us an apparent law or practice, namely, that one must specify their straying, at least to some extent. Rashi, commenting on the opening words of the text, explains that when one does offer admission, one must state, “Such-and-such straying I strayed.” In any case, the text proceeds to offer a proof text for this regulation, Ex 32:31. There Moses could surely have stopped after stating that the “people strayed a great straying,” for G!d surely understood precisely Moses’ reference: the people built the golden calf. Moses, after all, made this acknowledgment in a very timely way, for the previous verse (32:30) informed us that the very next day after he finished dealing with the Golden Calf episode, Moses made this admission before G!d on behalf of the people. Surely Moses did not assume that the Holy One suffered from short-term memory loss. Moses’ statement does indeed seem to imply the rule that one needs to detail the specific straying. The rule seems well-grounded.

This, however, does not end the matter. We find out rather quickly that this is neither a general law nor practice but, rather, a disagreement on how to proceed with an admission. Rabbi Judah ben Baba offers one view, and, we now learn, Rabbi Akiba offers a counterview, although it consists here merely of the

citation of Ps 32:1.¹⁴⁶ That verse states that one's "straying" has been "re-tracked." The Hebrew I have rendered as "re-tracked," literally means "covered" (*k'sui*). If such a "straying" were "covered," it could no longer be seen: it will be out of sight and, therefore, out of mind. As such, it could not and should not receive any detailing which would "uncover" it once more. Therefore, one should not offer detail in one's acknowledgement. This understanding of Rabbi Akiba would seem to have him hold a view diametrically opposed to Rabbi Judah's view. As further support, the notice of the first verse of a Psalm (or other passage) could hint to the one studying to look anywhere inside that passage. If so, we find that the psalmist in our psalm, the one Rabbi Akiba cites, clearly does not in the actual acknowledgment (v.5) specify a specific kind of straying, as Rashi interpreted, let alone detail it.

So Rabbi Akiba opposes specification of deed when acknowledging one's wrongdoings. If so, what, our text asks, does he, or someone accepting this position, make of Rabbi Judah's proof-text? It offered, after all, what seemed a powerful argument. The text suggests that Rabbi Akiba might accept how Rabbi Yannai of a century later understood that text.¹⁴⁷ This teaching of Rabbi Yannai is found in two other folios of the Talmud.¹⁴⁸ Yannai's teaching tries to explain the Biblical place name, Di-Zahav.¹⁴⁹ His teaching explains it as *Day Zahav!*, "Enough gold!" The use of Rabbi Yannai's clever pun on the place name suggests that Moses' specifying of the straying does not imply, as Rabbi Judah

¹⁴⁶ Rabbi Judah ben Baba is a 2nd c. Tanna (teacher of the Mishnaic period, 70 BCE-200 CE). Rabbi Akiba c.50-c.135 is also a Tanna.

¹⁴⁷ Yannai is a 3rd c. Amora (scholar of the period of the Gemara, 200-500 CE).

¹⁴⁸ Berachot 32a and Sanhedrin 102a.

¹⁴⁹ See Dt 1:1.

contends, that acknowledgments of any kind should be handled in this manner. Rather, Moses may have had another agenda: Moses was reminding G'd that the Holy One personally arranged matters so that the Egyptians continued to give gold and silver to the Israelites until the Israelites had more than they could transport. If so, G'd in some way laid the ground work and bears at least partial responsibility for the Israelites going astray. The Israelites had too much wealth, no experience with freedom and responsibility, had no true partnership with G'd on where they were going, for what purpose and how they could help, and, finally, they had seemingly nothing to do except wander, build a camp site, hang out, pack up, and wander some more. What did G'd expect? In fact, with no gold there could be no golden god. By reminding G'd of all this, the Deity would have to bear some of the blame and accept some of the responsibility and hence might be willing, when faced with this, to bring greater compassion to bear when considering Israel's poor role, which Moses does not avoid in his presentation. If all this is so, then perhaps sharing and acknowledgments need not be detailed.

The text ends there. No conclusions are drawn; we are not informed who is correct, and who is incorrect. It is interesting that the liturgical reaction to this text is to represent both views in the liturgy of Yom Kippur, the Day of Expiation, when Jews make acknowledgment before G'd of any wrongdoings for which they have tried to make amends with humans but have not yet made amends with G'd. The liturgy for Yom Kippur contains a number of passages specifically for us to render acknowledgment, but two passages predominate: the *Ashamnu* ("We are guilty") and the *Al Chet* ("For the Straying"). The first is known as the *Vidui*

Zuta, or “Brief Admission” and is a brief alphabetic listing of single Hebrew verbs, such as *ashamnu*, “We are guilty,” that remain rather unspecified. This pays honor to Rabbi Akiba’s position. The *Al Chet* is known as the *Vidui Rabba*, or “Lengthy Admission,” and consists of a longer double alphabetic of full sentences, each of which begins *Al chet she-chatati l’fanecha*, “For the Straying that We Strayed in Front of You,” and then specifies a wrongdoing, such as “tale bearing,” without further amplification. Each congregant will know how, or can at least reflect on how, that specific category of wrong doing played out in his or her life during the past year. This view pays homage to Rabbi Judah’s view, at least as Rashi understands it.¹⁵⁰

Of additional interest to Jews is that the disagreement between Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Akiba gains particular poignancy on Yom Kippur itself, for both Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Akiba are memorialized in the afternoon Yom Kippur during the Martyrology Service, as they constitute two of the Ten Martyrs that were caught by the Romans and martyred on the same day, indicating to us that any disagreements that Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Akiba might have had with each other and about which they argued passionately do not, in the end, matter as much as their collective legacy, what they yet accomplished together, even because of and through their disagreements, for a beleaguered people. Reconstitution of one’s relationship with someone does not necessarily mean that the two persons will always agree; appropriate if passionate disagreement may be a sign of the health of the relationship.

¹⁵⁰ Jeffrey M. Cohen, *1001 Questions and Answers on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), 360-361.

In any event, these two prayers, the *Vidui Zuta* and the *Vidui Rabba*, with antecedents in the rabbinic period, first gained formulation in the ninth-tenth centuries in shorter form, with an expansion and coalescing of wording in the eleventh century.¹⁵¹ Both remain today powerful highlights of the Yom Kippur service, with the *Ashamnu*'s power due to its brief, matter-of-fact, to-the-point cataloguing of wrongdoing set to a powerful, poignant chant. The *Al Chet* gains power due to the repetition, forty-four times, of the formula, "For the straying I strayed in front of You." Furthermore, since the formula evokes the root "to stray" twice, the root *chata*, "to stray," is evoked some eighty-eight times, every time during Yom Kippur that the *Al Chet* is recited.¹⁵² It is recited nine times in all with regard to Yom Kippur: four times silently and four times publicly during Yom Kippur proper, with one additional time in the silent Amidah prayer in the afternoon service immediately preceding Yom Kippur. The prayer becomes, then, a powerful litany, even mantra, which challenges the participant to reflect, to see where and how each category of potential "straying" that the prayer evokes relates to the individual's life during the past year. The formula is broken up several times for the refrain, "For all these, G!d of Forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us expiation," which seems not to detract but almost ensure the overall power of the prayer, for it gives space to consider precisely for what we need forgiveness and to reflect on the hurt in our soul.

The structuring of the *Al Chet* so that the root *chet*, "straying," gets evoked

¹⁵¹ Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holy Days: A Complete Guide to the History, Prayers and Themes* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 137-138.

¹⁵² This pattern is always followed by a nine-line variant, each of which begins, "For the straying for which we incur liability." This adds further to the overall effect.

eighty-eight times every time this prayer is recited may be purposeful when one carefully considers Psalm 19. The psalmist there first praises (vv. 1-7) the Holy One for creating the universe in two aspects: place and time. Each person grows and evolves by living in and learning from one's environment and one's past. The psalmist then (vv. 8-10) acknowledges the gift of the Torah as a repository of guidance for one's life-journey. The psalmist next (vv. 11-12) offers that "they" are truly "delightful" and one finds much "consequence," that is, one can gain much, from observing "them." I will return shortly to assess what the "they" of these key verses connote. The psalm then offers a plea (vv. 13-14) that the psalmist might live life free from error, emptied of secrets, and wary of presumptions,¹⁵³ lest they control the psalmist's ability to live life fully. To the degree that these hopes are realized the psalmist will be "complete" or "fulfilled" (*eitam*) and emptied of all defiance (*pesha rav*). The psalmist concludes (v. 15) with the hope that the psalmist's words, either the plea of vv. 13-14 or the entire psalm, be deemed acceptable to G!d.

Readers often assume that the referent of the pronouns "they" and "them" in vv. 11-12 is the wisdom of Torah, since the psalmist discusses Torah in the three immediately preceding verses, and those who think of Torah primarily as a legal corpus understand "observe" as connoting "obedience to laws." However, Torah as a feminine singular noun does not agree with the masculine plural "them." Surely the psalmist could have worded this more carefully if Torah were intended. The immediately preceding masculine plural noun is the phrase *mish-*

¹⁵³ One might profitably relate these three to the psalmist's three terms for straying in Psalm 32.

p'tei YHVH (“YHVH’s judgments”), but that seems too narrow for what the text as a whole intends. I contend that the actual referent is all the above—the universe which encompasses the continuums of space and time as well as Torah. These three should be thought of as offering each person untold “delights.” One can live most fully by taking the time to observe and learn from one’s environment, one’s personal and communal history, and from Torah’s guidance.

Rather than living a life of *pesha rav*,¹⁵⁴ “much defiance” (v. 14), the psalmist wants to live a life of *ekev rav*, “of much consequence” (v. 12) and can do so if the psalmist becomes *mi-paz rav*, more than “mighty paz” (v. 11). The word *paz* is traditionally translated as “fine gold,” seemingly a contextual guess. The ostensible root, *p-z-z*, appears in I Kings 10:18. There the text informs us that King Solomon overlaid his ivory throne with *zahav mufaz*, usually understood as “refined gold.”¹⁵⁵ If so, then *paz* means “that which is [fully] refined,” that is, any substance that receives or undergoes tremendous refinement.¹⁵⁶ Hirsch points out that, according to the Talmud,¹⁵⁷ such a substance is exceedingly rare. The psalmist here hopes to become that substance and live *mi-paz rav*, “with more than much refinement.” Engaging in and learning from one’s environment, from one’s communal history and personal past, and from Torah’s guidance are

¹⁵⁴ I showed the importance of *pesha* in Psalm 32:1 and 5. See above, 38 and 47. The adjective *rav* assumes importance in Psalm 32:6 and 10. See below, 143-6 and 174-7.

¹⁵⁵ Hirsch points out that a Talmudic text, *Yoma* 44b, lists seven varieties of gold, including *zahav mufaz*, which is explained there as gold which is *dome l'faz*, that is, gold which “resembles *paz*.” All this militates against understanding *paz* as a type of gold. See the discussion in Hirsch, 146-147.

¹⁵⁶ The derivation of *p-z-z* seems unclear, and even the BDB (808) offers no etymology or cross-cultural cognate form. Perhaps it is onomatopoeic, coming from the sounds of process at the refinery.

¹⁵⁷ B. Talmud, *Gittin* 58a.

the ways one continues to “refine” who one is and becomes. In this, I think one might consider the other biblical root *p-z-z*, “to be supple; to be agile.”¹⁵⁸ In order for holy refinement each person needs emotional and spiritual agility and flexibility to navigate life, even with the tools of time, place and Torah.

With this in mind, one can now understand the reason for having the worshiper of the *Al Chet* prayer mention “straying” precisely eighty-eight times whenever that prayer is recited. The worshiper, like the psalmist, wants to continue to refine one’s self, one’s inner spiritual core so that one becomes *mi-paz rav*, “more than much refinement.” One can also read the word *mi-paz* numerologically. In gematria, each letter of the alphabet receives a numerical value.¹⁵⁹ Such a reading never replaces other readings but, rather, supplements them. Through this lens, the word *mi-paz* means “more than eighty-seven.” The worshiper, like the psalmist, wishes to live in his or her milieu over time with Torah’s help not just as a somewhat refined person but as a fully refined vessel of joyous and holy living. I find some support for the reading of *mi-paz* as “more than eighty-seven” by noting that the word *u-mi-paz* is precisely the eighty-seventh word of the psalm. It seems plausible, at least, that the editor, if not the author, of the psalm had this in mind; it is likely that the author of the *Al Chet* did as well. Thus the worshiper of the *Al Chet* evokes “straying” eighty-eight times, not eighty-seven or less, in order to acknowledge not merely how one’s living did

¹⁵⁸ This root appears once in the Qal form (Gn 49:24) and once in the *Pi’el* form (2 Sm 6:16).

¹⁵⁹ In its simplest form, used here, the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet are assigned the values one to ten; the next eight are assigned in intervals of ten from twenty to ninety, while the final four letters connote the numbers one hundred through four hundred in intervals of one hundred.

not always meet one's aspirations but to acknowledge how much teshuvah and thereby how much growth work the worshiper has indeed achieved. The worshiper can now walk through the final gate of Ne'ilah into the New Year as that fully refined person who now intends to continue living in that rarefied state.¹⁶⁰

In sharing this insight with my class, my student Linda Seidman,¹⁶¹ suggested a variant understanding of the Al Chet's numerological reading of Psalm 19, namely that the concern is not merely for "more than eighty-seven" but for precisely "eighty-seven + one," and thereby "eighty-eight." In this understanding the "eighty-seven" would be the delights of personal attention to and reflection on those items that the psalm specifically names: one's environment (the universe), one's personal and collective past (history) and Torah's guidance. These delights, however, can only help fully on one's life journey when one has a relationship with the One, with G!d. The psalmist has only mentioned G!d as the Shaper and Organizer of the universe (vv. 1-7) and as a Teacher and Lawgiver (vv. 8-10), but not as a Being with Whom one might maintain an active, personal relationship. This is merely hinted at in the phrase *u-mi-paz rav*, for the prefix *mi-* indicates that something more is needed. The listener or reader only realizes the reason for the omission of G!d when one gets to the last line of the psalm: The psalmist has been in conversation with G!d the

¹⁶⁰ *Ne'ilah* means "closing" and refers to the final "closing" service of Yom Kippur, which uses the imagery of the "closing" of the Gates of Heaven for the time to do one's self-reflection on the past year and one's work of *teshuvah* for it. A shofar blast signals the end, then, not merely of that service but of the entire High Holy Day period.

¹⁶¹ Academy for the Jewish Religion, California (AJRCA), Medieval Jewish Thought and Literature, October 25, 2009.

whole time. The conversation of the prayer, then, exemplifies the psalmist's relationship. One can talk to G!d and, if so, G!d listens. Moreover, at points on one's journey, one senses or realizes G!d's hidden Presence throughout the universe, in Torah and in our lives. This constitutes the hidden deeper lesson of this psalm. This numerological reading receives further support by noting that the psalms contains precisely fifteen verses, represented in gematria by G!d's Name, YaH.¹⁶² The hidden Presence of G!d might be sought out, or not, and might be found, or not, but always remains present.

Returning to my larger discussion regarding how much detailing one should give when giving an acknowledgment or offering one's "truth," I found two separate opinions (those of Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Akiba) which represent two solutions, side by side, both in the legal argumentation of the Talmud and, later, in liturgical representation, in the *Al Chet*. What are we to do? The wisdom of carrying more than one answer through each generation is that each answer carries wisdom for different generations. Both answers can be right, and Tradition is wise not to dictate. Surely in some circumstances with some people, in some places, at some moments, we need to be quite explicit and detailed. We first need to ensure that they know, if they do not, that it was we who need to share something powerful or admit responsibility for some wrong. If the former, some detailing may fill in important gaps for the other party. After all, neglect or refusal to share distances the other person and gives them less opportunity to truly know us. With less knowledge, they may indeed misunderstand us. If the

¹⁶² This form of G!d's name, taken from the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton, G!d's Holy four-letter name, is mostly widely known perhaps as the last syllable of the word "hallelujah," which literally means, "Praise G!d!"

latter case of admitting some wrong, detailing may become crucial. In the case of gossiping, for example, the other party will most often wish to know the extent—to how many people did we gossip over how long a period of time? Whether they did or did not already know that we gossiped about them prior to our acknowledging it to them, we shall always need to make it clear to the other party that we know—really know—what we did and how that hurt them and in how many ways it hurt them, and that we have become contrite and more humble.

Nonetheless, in other situations brevity is the wiser course. If it is a deep sharing of self, we need to feel that the other person is someone we wish to know. If the matter is an issue of something we did badly, we need to evaluate. To revisit an ugly episode in some cases is to re-open a wound and will feel to the other person as if we have stuck in the knife once again to hurt them, not help them. In still other cases, something in between these two polar positions will be more appropriate.

When dealing with human vulnerability and human honor—our own and that of the other party—no one regulation can fit all circumstances, all people, and all possibilities. In rendering no conclusion, the midrash is indeed wise. We shall grow spiritually and emotionally each time we make acknowledgment and invite response—learning how to admit and ask for forgiveness with grace, learn how to tailor our presentation to not only match our spiritual reality but to gauge the emotional stance of the one we encounter. All of these are difficult and delicate considerations. But this is what the moment calls for—not a template to

mimic but the touching of souls so that there can be healing of hearts.¹⁶³

Questions to ponder:

1. How do you feel admission is most appropriately and efficaciously made?

Consider the following options:

- a) Privately within one's heart?
- b) Orally (to a therapist, or within a 12-step or support group setting?
- c) To G!d in prayer or to G!d outside of prayer?
- d) To the person we know or think we ought to share or we think we have hurt or wronged?
- e) To a parent or spouse?
- f) To a close friend?
- g) In written form (Email, handwritten letter)? Privately in one's heart?

2. Is admission a form of prayer? How so? Is prayer a form of admission?

How so?

3. Can admission be considered a spiritual act? In what way(s)?

4. Can admission be considered a godly act? How so? Have you ever acknowledged a wrong to someone and felt G!d's Presence as you did so?

What was that experience like?

5. The psalmist contrasts "I was silent" (v.3) with "I stated" (v. 5). Have you ever kept silent when you feel you should have spoken? What was the occasion?

Why did you keep silent? When did you start to think about your silence?

¹⁶³ Rambam apparently learns a different lesson from this text, for he suggests that one detail fully making one's acknowledgment to another person (R. Judah's view) but offer no detailing when offering acknowledgment to G!d. See Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:5, 53a and Schweid, 100.

6. Conversely, have you ever spoken up or continued to speak when you feel you should not have spoken at all or should have spoken much more succinctly? What was that occasion? Why did you speak or continue to speak? When did your speaking begin to concern you?

7. When was the last time you remember offering admission? How did it feel? What might you have done differently? What did you do well? How have you grown from the experience?

8. Have you ever intended to acknowledge something to someone but ended up short of a full admission? What happened? What did you actually state in your acknowledgment or admission? If you could take a moment now to redo the actual acknowledgment or admission, how would you reword it?

9. Do you recall an admission you have made that was not a work of your own righteousness but, rather, an act of faith, pure faith? How did that proceed? What happened?

Stage 3: Sharing the Feeling (Vv. 6-7)

So, I have demonstrated that the Psalmist looks back to a personal crisis in which the catharsis undergone seems not inappropriate to the crisis itself, at least after the act of acknowledgement or admission—for the psalmist offers up no complaint, merely description, of the spiritual and physical degeneration before the admission. Thus the initial stage of awareness, that one's overall condition is directly related to the state of one's spiritual health as much as to any other factor, was followed by the second stage, the one of the offering of the acknowledgment or admission itself. Now the psalmist "goes public," the third

stage, in which the psalmist makes witness to and shares the entire experience with the community while still carrying the tremendous feeling of release and joy that such articulation provided. The psalmist feels as if the glad release attendant to the act of admission needs to be shared.¹⁶⁴ Whether one frames this as “needs,” “wants,” or “deserves,” the psalmist shares by way of drawing the life lesson that every person needs to be prayerful, this is, be responsibly spiritual, look within honestly, and live in response. It seems that such an approach carries the seeds of affirmation within itself—and the person living in this way will indeed be the recipient of Divine *chesed*, “loving kindness,”¹⁶⁵ something Gld gives apparently in accordance with each person’s reality. The point, however, is that one can expect such steadfast love and covenant loyalty if one lives life with the same.

This message is not directed to the psalmist’s closest family, friends and associates so that they might reciprocate and also acknowledge any and all that they have done to the psalmist. Yes, relationships must be mutual, but the psalmist has gone to the community of faith and focused upon what the life lesson holds for the psalmist, not for others. It remains for the community to filter that lesson within their own hearts, integrating it and making it personal. If that were not the case, and the psalmist merely wished to find a way to get others to admit what they did, the psalmist’s ulterior motives would place him in the category of one “whose life spirit contains deceit” (v. 2). However, the psalmist’s message is directed to the community as a whole for two reasons: so that

¹⁶⁴ Davidson, 111.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. v. 10.

anyone might take the lesson to heart, and because such a lesson belongs to the life of corporate identities as well as to individuals. The psalmist invites the individuals not merely to individual self-examination but invites the community as well to engage in an analogous probing.

Alter dismisses v. 6 as one artificially placed into the psalm “through scribal inadvertence,” largely, it seems, because of his sense that it lacks “scansion” and “parallelism.”¹⁶⁶ It seems to me a dubious premise that every verse in Psalms that seems to exhibit no parallelism or that lacks scansion must be mistakenly placed or preserved. Furthermore, introducing a new subsection the change in form may well be intentional. Hopefully the preceding and following discussion shows how well the verse does seem to fit into the overall plan of the psalm.

Al-zot/Therefore

Different readers understand the precise force of *al zot* somewhat differently. Sforino interprets as “therefore,” suggesting that the text intends something like: “Therefore one should do *teshuvah* (“rectification” or “reconciliation”) at the first intimation of misfortune, so that a “flood of suffering” will not overtake the individual.”¹⁶⁷

Others, such as the Me’iri,¹⁶⁸ assert that the phrase *al zot* here means “for this,” that is “for this misdeed” that the psalmist did commit the psalmist cannot expect to be spared of all consequences.¹⁶⁹ Rather, the psalmist—and the

¹⁶⁶ Alter, 111.

¹⁶⁷ Noted by Danziger, 64. Obadiah Sforino (c. 1470-c.1550) practiced medicine and ran a Hebrew printing business in Bologna. His commentary employs his knowledge of medicine and science.

¹⁶⁸ Menachem Me’iri (1249-c. 1310), was a Catalanian rabbi, Talmudist in the Maimonidean tradition.

¹⁶⁹ Noted by Danziger, 64.

listener—should acknowledge their mistakes and misdeeds and pray that punishment be mitigated.

What I note, with this phrase, is a change from addressing the Deity directly to addressing the community.¹⁷⁰ The psalmist's onlookers are the *kahal*, the community of the faithful. They share the faith that the psalmist holds dear, and, surely, much of the psalmist's perspective. We might consider them, then, G!d's "loyal friends," too, to use Clifford's phrase.¹⁷¹ The sense of this phrase is something like, "Therefore, because YHVH gives affirmation (or forgives wrongdoing) and such affirmation (or forgiveness) can result in spiritual progress and character growth (as it has in my [the psalmist's] case, just as I have expressed), consider the following!" The reference of *zot* may thus be considered the entire process of the psalmist through the first two stages in getting to and making admission. That is, the *zot* is the psalmist's experience.

Something more may be at stake as well. Bernhard Anderson suggests that the wrong that Divine affirmation or forgiveness rectifies should not be understood "individualistically," for "the self is stained by the society in which one lives—its unjust social structures, economic injustice, and violence in various forms."¹⁷² This does not signal that the community should accept blame for the individual's choice of path. Rather, as Heschel often taught during the 1960's, "in a democratic society some are guilty, all are responsible," since "responsibility is our inescapable inheritance as free citizens."¹⁷³ So, everyone in the community

¹⁷⁰ Clifford, 165, notices this as well.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 167.

¹⁷² B. Anderson, 79.

shares in the strength and weaknesses exhibited by the others; everyone has something at stake in the successful journeying of everyone in the community.

So the psalmist shares the unique experience of G!d's embrace, whether affirmation or forgiveness, with them. Such sharing may teach the community, or us, of the One with whom they exist in Holy Covenant or convey to them something of faith. The psalmist's very personal experience certainly reminds us that the commission of something one now regrets "need not destroy" the individual or "separate" him or her "from G!d" or community.¹⁷⁴ One can entrust that sense of wrongdoing to G!d to carry away, to cease counting it. And one can situate oneself within a *kehillat kodesh*, a "holy community," where such sharing of personal experience becomes something that members can feel comfortable doing, knowing that others support them in their spiritual growth. For the psalmist this seems natural; for the reader, one must ask wherein does one locate the community that nourishes the self and hears one's voice and receives the life lesson that the individual, as the Psalmist, has learned through life experience and would dearly love to share.

Yit-palle!/Let (the kindness-seeking) examine their lives

The first word of advice that the psalmist offers the community comes off as simple: *Yit-palle!* On one level, one could use the usual translation of this word, "pray." The psalmist has experienced the benefits of this prayer of admission as part of the *teshuvah* process and now commends such a practice to others.

¹⁷³ Edward K. Kaplan, "Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Activist," The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, http://www.uscj.org/cgi-bin/print.pl?Abraham_Joshua_Hesch7490.html (accessed September 7, 2009).

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

Through such a communal moment the psalmist released a personal burden; those listening, all those in the psalmist's community—and, indeed, all humans—too have hurt and pain, past and present, they have harbored and desperately need to express.

However, this exhortation, to me, signifies something deeper at least in addition to the usual understanding, if not instead of it. The reflexive root could also mean, "Start examining your selves! Reflect upon and evaluate your life!" Thus Hirsch explains the term as "acknowledging and imbuing oneself with the knowledge of the truth and thus to acquire the proper insight concerning one's self and all of one's relationships."¹⁷⁵ When one prays, at least in a Jewish context, one is not usually or primarily asking for something. Rather, we are evaluating where we are on our life journey; we are aligning our lives with Divine purpose.

Chasid/kindness-seeking

The psalmist would like everyone to feel that they can truly experience life as kind, that they should learn to receive it and seek to promote it. It seems no coincidence to me, then, that the word *chasid*, "kindness-seeking," lies at the heart of the psalm; in fact, it is the exact center word of the psalm. The striving for piety is also a life lesson about which the psalmist's experience has taught and enriched the psalmist. A life suffused with kindness, this psalm thus proposes, is one which at its core lays itself vulnerable to others in relationship. Not just the word, but the value lies at the human heart. In context, living out

¹⁷⁵ Hirsch, 228.

kindness may encompass the risk that we will do or state something that we shall later regret, but it also means that we can follow up any and every misstep along the way with open and sincere acknowledgment, and that like the Jewish conception of “day” that begins at night and continues until and through the daytime, our long night of pains, hurts, sufferings and misery will always be followed by the light of day, wherein we find warmth, love, support, healing and wholeness.

L'eit m'tsolat the moment of discovering

The time referred to in the phrase *l'eit m'tso*, a time of discovering, may refer to a time when the kind-striving person can “discover” G'd, that is, when G'd is available. Thus Rozenberg and Zlotowitz understand this phrase as referring to a time when G'd is receptive to supplication.¹⁷⁶ Along with other commentators, such as Ibn Ezra,¹⁷⁷ they point to Is 55:6:¹⁷⁸

Dir-shu et YHVH **b'hi-mats'o**
Seek YHVH when G'd **may be discovered**.

If such is the psalmist's intention, then the psalmist presumes that the community that has heard the psalmist's experience and now hears and takes in this appropriate lesson that the psalmist does offer (a *lekach tov*, a “good lesson,” as Prv 4:2 puts it), has knowledge of when those times occur. What is clearly presumed, in this line of interpretation, is that G'd is not necessarily always available to the truly penitent, but only at specific times. Such an idea may well be part of the ancient mind-set, but it also seems to run counter to such

¹⁷⁶ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, 184.

¹⁷⁷ Abraham ibn Ezra, c.1089-c.1164, was a Spanish philosopher, astronomer, astrologer, poet, linguist and exegete.

¹⁷⁸ See *Mikra'ot*, 3:21a.

texts as Ps 145:18:

Karov YHVH l'chol kor'av l'chol asher yik-ra'uhu ve-emet.
Nearby is YHVH to all who call to YHVH; to all who call to YHVH truthfully.

This verse suggests that all kind-seeking persons will find G!d available whenever they call out sincerely or truthfully. The word *emet*, “truth,” is an artificial word comprised of precisely the first, middle, and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, suggesting that if something is truthful, it must be true from beginning to end. Truth cannot have motives or agendas; it contains no *r'miyah*. This is precisely the stance of our psalmist: After deep soul-searching, the psalmist relieved the self of all pretense and ego and approached the Holy One with *emet*, sincere truthfulness, and found G!d available and responsive. Either the psalmist discovered the “right time” to approach G!d or G!d is ever-available.

This interpretation also understands that the editors who kept this language presumed that their readers would know when such times occur—or else kept the language in spite of this difficulty, presumably because it was already enshrined in tradition and could not be further changed. The psalm itself could be understood to presume such times exist, because of the successful nature of the psalmist's current experience. Perhaps the psalmist's past experiences in seeking the Holy One, or some consultation the psalmist had with someone spiritually attuned, such as a priest, or other instances that remained within the collective memory of the psalmist's community could lead the psalmist to learn at which times the Holy One is particularly receptive to the penitent. Of course within a later synagogue setting, one might presume that the statutory times for

communal prayer constituted the times when G!d is receptive to prayer. Statutory public prayers have always included and incorporated room for personal prayers. However, Rozenberg and Zlotowitz point out that traditional Jews have maintained a belief that G!d is closest to earth at midnight (*chatzot*) and therefore go to the Western Wall to pray at that hour, the Western Wall constituting the last remaining wall of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, where G!d was believed to “reside” in some sense.¹⁷⁹ We further note that the Selihot service that inaugurates the High Holy day season wherein this Psalm is recited begins traditionally at midnight.

The modern reader understands that the Deity has much on the Divine plate—wars, famines, earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, economic turndowns, prejudice, starvation, climate change, and so much more. Nonetheless, the modern adherent of almost every religion believes that any Deity worthy of the name should be available at all times. This first possible interpretation of *l'eit m'tso* as at “a time” when one might actually be able to “discover” G!d, and find the Deity in a receptive posture for communication, may be a troubling one for the modern reader.

Perhaps the phrase *l'eit m'tso* intends a time when the supplicant is ready to discover G!d or to communicate with G!d. If so, the phrase may refer to that part of the process during which one has reflected upon and probed one's behavior. When one reaches the point of realization that one must approach the injured party, human or Divine, one must prepare appropriately and fully for that encounter. The time for engagement cannot come before then; one should not

¹⁷⁹ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, 184.

feel forced into an encounter prematurely just because one realizes that such an interfacing is necessary. Neither should one take the encounter lightly and merely acknowledge the “straying” at one’s convenience in a casual way.

I find a third alternative interpretation as well, one that my translation and commentary prefers. The phrase “at the time of discovering” could indicate not the time when one might find G!d or find oneself ready to encounter G!d but, rather, the time when one “discovers” or “finds” one’s own self. At the time when one admits to oneself one’s responsibility for one’s life, or culpability for some wrong, one can take action that can at least help one to feel affirmation or otherwise lead to a sense of forgiveness, at least from G!d, if not others (since the granting of affirmation or forgiveness is not in the hands of the one seeking it), and, we pray, affirmation or forgiveness from ourselves. This idea of the supplicant “finding” one’s mind free and heart whole is the understanding of the *Metzudat David*.¹⁸⁰

L'eit m'tso: k'she-yim-tsa libo shalem bit-shuvah
 “At a time of discovering”: When one discovers the heart full [or
 “complete”] with penitence.

Similarly, Ibn Ezra offers this as one possible understanding as well and adduces 2 Sm 7:27 as support.¹⁸¹

Al ken matsa av-d'cha et libo l'hit-pallel eilecha et-hat'fillah hazot.
 Thereupon Your servant [King David] discovered his heart to pray to You
 this prayer.

¹⁸⁰ See *Mikra'ot G'dolot*, 3:21a. *Metzudat David* is an eighteenth c. Galician commentary by David Altschuler and completed by his son Yechiel, who divided it into two *metzudot* or “pillars”: *Metzudat Zion* explains difficult words while *Metzudat David* explains difficult texts.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Ibn Ezra apparently understands the phrase “discovered his heart” to mean “discovered” his heart” ready at that time to offer prayer.

With such an understanding, it becomes clear that forgiveness depends not merely or primarily upon the Affirmer/Forger—although G!d is the only one who can grant ultimate affirmation/forgiveness. It all depends upon whether we are or are not ready to readily and candidly face up to who we are and what we have done and not done, and pour out our soul before G!d.

Rak/Truly

The word *Rak* cannot be understood as “only.” If it were, we would be forced to interpret here that the psalmist is suggesting that people who sincerely strive to live pious lives “only” pour out their souls to G!d to avert catastrophe but do not engage in a regular spiritual discipline of any kind. Because of this difficulty, some scholars try to emend the phrase *l'eit m'tso + rak* to *l'eit matsor*, “a time of distress” or to *l'eit matsok*, “a time of stress.” Similar proposals have been made for the psalm previous to ours, where the *BHS* offers two suggestions for the awkward phrase *b'ir matsor*, “in the besieged city”:¹⁸² *b'eit matsor*, “a time of distress”, or *b'eit matsok*, “a time of stress.”¹⁸³ Such proposals may find support in the cantillation marks. However, the use of the annotation of cantillation comes late, perhaps only as early as the eighth century CE. Nonetheless, if we could determine that the emendation *l'eit matsor* were indeed the correct reading in our psalm, the word might aurally hint at and point to the phrase *mi-tsar tits-reini*, “from narrow straits You release me,” in v. 7.

¹⁸² Ps 31:22.

¹⁸³ *BHS*, 1112.

As ingenious as they may be, and whatever merit these suggestions have, they find no support in the manuscripts. If we could not make sense of the Masoretic text, such suggestions would be welcome and be very useful. However, that is not the case. *Rak* here is emphatic and means “surely” or “truly.” Delitzsch points to the following examples to establish the usage.¹⁸⁴

V'am-ru: “**Rak** am chacham v'navon hagoy hagadol haze.”
They [other peoples] will affirm,
“**Surely** what a wise and intelligent people is this great nation.”¹⁸⁵

Va-tevk eishet Shimshon alav, vatomer, “**Rak** s'neitani v'lo ahav-tani; ha-chida chad-ta liv-nei ami v'li lo higad-ta.”
Then Samson's wife cried to him, “**Surely** you hate me, not love me. You riddled a riddle to my compatriots and you didn't tell [the answer].”¹⁸⁶

Rak lo haya k'Ach-ov...
Surely there was never a person like Ahab...¹⁸⁷

Rak b'einecha tabit; v'shilumat r'sha'im tir-e.
Surely You see; the payback to the wicked You will see.¹⁸⁸

My translation follows this established meaning of *rak*, and sees it as the beginning of the following phrase; this usage of *rak* always does initiate a phrase or clause, as all of the above examples attest.

Mayim rabim/mighty waters

In urging those in the community to similarly place themselves in a posture of self-examination, the psalmist states that people who avail themselves of the spiritual discipline of acknowledgment and admission remain free of *mayim rabim*, the *mighty waters*. *Rav* often indicates quantity and then indicates “many.”

¹⁸⁴ Delitzsch, 254.

¹⁸⁵ Dt 4:6.

¹⁸⁶ Jgs 14:16.

¹⁸⁷ I Kgs 21:25a.

¹⁸⁸ Ps 91:8.

However it also indicates quality and then indicates “strength.” Thus *rav l’hoshi-a* in Is 63:1 the Deity is “mighty to liberate.”

The phrase “the mighty waters” retains an echo of the threatening powers of chaos which YHVH must contain. We find this idea elsewhere. In Ps 29:3 we learn that the Deity remains or resides above this chaos:

YHVH al **mayim rabim**
YHVH is above (even) **the mighty waters**.

In Ps 144:7 the psalmist begs

hatsileinu **mi-mayim rabim**,
Rescue me **from the mighty waters**.

In Ps 18:17, we find that G!d, at least sometimes, seems to respond to such profound urging:

Yam-sheini **mi-mayim rabim**
G!d drew me **out of mighty waters**.

The phrase, then, reverberates with the echoes of chaos, which here symbolize the situation of suffering and distress. Rozenberg and Zlotowitz even find in this a reference to the great primeval Flood¹⁸⁹ which almost upended the order and control of the “mighty waters” that G!d previously imposed, but which at the end of the story reminds us that only the wayward perish, with the exemplary saved.¹⁹⁰ Righteousness cannot bypass confronting one’s essential self, acknowledging one’s errors and deficiencies, and acknowledging publicly to G!d.

While the phrase “the mighty waters” may indeed conjure up chaotic primeval waters, the phrase may also depict something that the ancient Israelite

¹⁸⁹ Gn 6-9.

¹⁹⁰ Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, 184.

would well have known from personal experience: a flash flood pouring down a *wadi*.¹⁹¹ Such “mighty waters” destroy everything in its path, while people in the danger zone can only watch helplessly, hoping that it will not reach and engulf them. Even in such a dire situation, the faithful express their confidence in Divine protection and the joyful deliverance that they shall subsequently experience.

The phrase “the mighty waters,” then, seems akin to the more contemporary expression “when all hell breaks loose.”¹⁹² The psalmist is raising the idea that for many, trying to live a full life can seem not merely a challenge but all at once a struggle, where those metaphoric waters continually threaten to overtake us. These “mighty waters” could symbolize, then, the outer struggles, such as a natural disaster, war, or the loss of a job. Alternatively “the mighty waters” could refer to our inner struggles, the potential for drowning in guilt, shame, or alienation. Weiser asserts that both meanings operate at once but the predominant sense is one of the psalmist “remaining inwardly unassailable by affliction and danger.”¹⁹³

Whether “the mighty waters” refers to outer or inner struggles, or both, the image offers a watery counterpoint to the earlier image of the speaker, who before admission remained debilitated and enervated as in a summer drought.¹⁹⁴ In the stubborn refusal to confront one’s behavior and claim responsibility, the psalmist has been drying up inside and drowning on the outside! In either case, as soon as the “floodgates” of feelings are opened the psalmist can sort them all

¹⁹¹ A. A. Anderson, 258; Davidson, 111.

¹⁹² Davidson, 111.

¹⁹³ Weiser, 286.

¹⁹⁴ Levine, 98.

out and reestablish direction. When this happens the “waters subside” and the built-up “pressure diminishes,” perhaps altogether so.¹⁹⁵

Ata seiter li/You are a hiding place for me

The psalmist comes to the realization that G'd constitutes a *seiter*, not merely a “shelter” as many translations render, but one’s “hiding place” or “hideout.”¹⁹⁶ This is where the psalmist can metaphorically “cool down” and “dry off,” following the imagery we have just explored.

When Jonathan knew that his father Saul, the king, was determined to kill David, he told David:¹⁹⁷

v'yashav-ta **va-seiter** v'nach-beita
settle in a **place of concealment** and secrete yourself.”¹⁹⁸

The Holy One is the security haven available to each of us, the times when we feel safe and lovingly embraced by the wings of Shechinah, G'd's Presence. That this feeling may come as a startling realization accounts for the use of the emphatic pronoun *ata*, “You,” which seems to look back to verse 5.¹⁹⁹ There it highlights the startling gift of Divine forgiveness: *v'ata nasata*, “You forgave.” Thus the awareness that the Holy One can, does and will forgive—*ata nasata*—is a quite powerful realization, just as is the realization that the Holy One is ever-available to all, to protect and to conceal—*ata seiter li*--which provides everyone with the needed personal spiritual space to sort out one's lives, inner and outer. The use of the emphatic pronouns reminds each listener or reader just how

¹⁹⁵ Craigie, 267.

¹⁹⁶ Levine, 98.

¹⁹⁷ Limburg, 104.

¹⁹⁸ I Sm 19:2.

¹⁹⁹ McCann, 806.

delightfully startling such awareness is for those who sometimes feel spiritually un-tuned and under-developed. Every person, however, retains the capacity to experience the Holy in encounter, an “I-Thou” encounter, to use Buber’s terminology.²⁰⁰ There may be no hiding from G!d, but there is holy hiding with G!d.

This *ata*, “You,” carries over as the subject of each of the three clauses in this verse. *Midah k’neged midah*, “measure for measure,” G!d responds to each of the three phrases of acknowledgment and admission in v. 5, *chatati odi-acha, va-avoni lo chisiti* and *amarti* “Ode...*chatati*.”²⁰¹

Mi-tsar tits-reini/From narrow straits You release me

As part of the encouragement to others in the community, the psalmist explicitly refers back to the original experience: “From narrow straits You released me” (v. 7). By so doing the psalmist ensures that the life lesson offered publicly does not become “doctrine” or sound tendentious, but remains a *maskil*, the fruit of a profound experience.²⁰² The psalmist has undergone a transformational experience; it is that which instructs, so the psalmist rightly lets that experience form a seminal role in the presentation of the instruction to and for the gathered community.

Dahood²⁰³ and Alter²⁰⁴ each derives *tsar* from *ts-r-r* II, meaning “to show hostility toward.”²⁰⁵ Dahood and Alter thus translate as a “besieger” or “foe” from

²⁰⁰ See Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1970).

²⁰¹ Clifford, 165.

²⁰² Clifford, 167.

²⁰³ Dahood, 195.

²⁰⁴ Alter, 111.

²⁰⁵ *BDB*, 865.

which the Holy One spares the psalmist from further confrontation. They each offer no reason for this choice. Indeed, Alter acknowledges that the idea of “enemy” is not appropriate to the context of the psalm. He then defends his interpretive choice with the hypothesis that a copyist errantly and inexplicably misplaced this verse in the middle of our psalm.

The interpretation of Dahood and Alter does not stand on its own terms. The Hebrew Bible never places a word from *ts-r-r* II in proximity with *n-ts-r*, “to watch, to guard, to keep” except, of course, in the understanding of Alter and Dahood and only then in this verse, which Alter himself attributes to a startlingly incompetent scribal error. Rather, the Hebrew Bible uses verbs of rescue or overcoming with “enemies.” These include *m-l-t* (“to escape, to deliver”) in Jb 6:23, *y-sh-’* (“to save, to liberate”) in Ps 44:8 and Neh 9:27; *p-r-k* + *min* (“to snatch from”) in Ps 136:24 and *n-k-m* (“to avenge”) in Dt 32:43, Jer 46:10 and Na 1:2.

The more common line of interpretation takes *tsar* from *ts-r-r* I, “to bind up, to tie up, to be narrow, scant, cramped.”²⁰⁶ Thus most translators use something like “You preserve me from distress.” One clear example of this usage comes in Ps 119:143:

Tsar u-matsok m’tsa’uni.
Distress and stress discover me.

This line of interpretation is supported by the fact that this *ts-r-r* I does indeed appear in close proximity with *n-ts-r*, “to watch, to guard, to keep” in several instances.²⁰⁷ So, for example, following the just cited reference from

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 864.

Psalms 119:143 we find in 119:45:

Aneini YHVH chukecha **e-tsora**.
 Answer me, YHVH, your decrees **I will keep**.

The two roots also appear in proximity in Prov 24:10, 12:²⁰⁸

Hit-rapita b'yom tsara **tsar** kochecha...
v'notser naf-sh'cha.
 If you showed your own weakness at a time of distress,
narrow in your power...[G!d] **will guard** your life.

While *ts-r-r* is surely the root of the noun here, a translator's use of a term such as "distress" conceals the spatial metaphor inherent in the Hebrew.²⁰⁹ The sense is that "You pull me out of a tight, constricted place, out of a 'jam.'" The psalmist took what was hidden tightly inside, blocking the psalmist's personal development and finally uncovered it, offering it to G!d to be hidden within G!d's own hidden Nature. With G!d the psalmist found a "hideout," an open place where the psalmist finally was afforded some emotional and physical "breathing space," far different from the constriction of the "narrow place" in which the psalmist had been for so long. Of course the psalm does not reveal the psalmist's particular *tsar*, the psalmist's problem, concern, worry, or wrongdoing. It has been "covered over" by the undergone process of admission and subsequent affirmation or forgiveness, as v. 1 indicates. What is more important than the psalmist's problem or wrongdoing is ours: Will we be strong enough to put ourselves through an analogous process to the psalmist's? Will we allow ourselves to be truly vulnerable? Can we face the pain of our lives so that we can

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 665.

²⁰⁸ See as well Prov 23:26-27; Jb 7:11, 20.

²⁰⁹ See Levine, 98-99.

tap into the joy underneath it and waiting beyond it?

Excursus 5: The Intertextuality

of Psalms 31, 32, and 27

I previously noted²¹⁰ how Psalm 32 connects with the immediately preceding psalm in that they both find a psalmist experiencing a similar physical problem, that of “bones atrophying,” as a symptom of a larger problem.²¹¹ This preceding psalm also uses this same root *tsar* to express the psalmist’s state.²¹²

Chaneini YHVH ki **tsar** li...

Be gracious to me, YHVH, for I am in a **narrow strait**...

This psalm also connects with the first three words of our verse, *ata seiter li*, that immediately precede this phrase.²¹³

Tastirem b’seiter panecha...tits-p’nem b’suko

You shall conceal them in Your concealing Presence...You shall protect them in a shelter...

All of this suggests another resonance of the larger phrase *ata seiter li; mi-tsar tits-reini*, especially for the Jewish community. Our psalm is read either during Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath during the Ten Days of Penitence or, alternatively, on Yom Kippur, the last of those ten days and their culmination, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar.

Psalm 27 is read every evening and every morning of the entire High Holy Day period, from the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul, one month before the Ten Days of Penitence that end with Yom Kippur and continue through Hoshana

²¹⁰ See above, 68-9.

²¹¹ Ps. 31:11 and 32:3.

²¹² Ps. 31:10. Note as well the use of *n-ts-r* in 31:24.

²¹³ Ps. 31:21.

Rabbah, the seventh day of the festival of Sukkot, the most joyous holy day of the Jewish calendar.²¹⁴ Jews thus recite this psalm precisely one hundred times (twenty-nine days of Elul and twenty-one days of Tishri, twice a day). It thus has tremendous power.

During the High Holy Day season, then, the recitation of Psalm 32 liturgically is surrounded, then, by multiple recitations of Psalm 27, so that many devout worshipers will pick up resonances that this Psalm may evoke with other texts of the High Holy Day liturgy. With all this in mind, I now look at Ps 27:5:

Ki yits-p'neini b'sukko b'yom ra'ah yas-tireini bseiter aholo, b'tsur y'rom'meni.

You will protect me in Your shelter; You will conceal me in the concealment of the Tent; on a rock you raise me up.

I note that both Pss 27:5 and 31:21 hold the hope that G'd will conceal the psalmist in a *sukkah*, a temporary shelter. Psalm 27 suggests that G'd would conceal the psalmist in *seiter aholo*, the Divine "tent," usually indicating the Temple, but always the place where G'd's Presence is keenly felt. In Psalm 31 this becomes merely *seiter panecha*, "Your concealing Presence," so that the psalmist need no longer feel that G'd can only be experienced in a location that one's spiritual community has designated as particularly potent or has therein historically experienced G'd's Presence keenly. In Psalm 32 no *sukkah* remains and, indeed, any hint of geographical location has disappeared. What matters ultimately to G'd is not my location but me! Thus all this has transmuted into

²¹⁴ The extension of the High Holy Day period, discussed above, 56, to include Hoshana Rabbah, is reflected in the traditional image of the Books of Life and Death wherein the Deity inscribes each person's fate on Rosh Hashanah (1 Tishri), seals each on Yom Kippur (10 Tishri) and closes both books on Hoshana Rabbah (21 Tishri) until the following year's High Holy Day period.

merely *ata seiter li*, “You are concealment for me,” in whatever location I am, even, perhaps, when I am not fully aware of this at the moment. I find potential additional assonance in the Hebrew between *mi-tsar tits-reini*, “from a narrow place You release Me,” and *b’tsur y’rom’meini*, “on a rock You raise me up.”

Ibn Ezra takes the phrase *b’tsur y’rom’meini* (“on a rock, G!d will raise me”) as an explanation of the previous phrase, *yas-tireini b’seiter ahol* (“G!d will conceal me in the concealment of the Tent”).²¹⁵ Each person can feel most elevated when in concealment in G!d’s tent. That is, each person is raised up not at some geographical high point but at the very point in time that one decides to find G!d’s tent, find G!d’s concealment, where one can have the temporary space, time, privacy and Divine support to sort out who one is, how one has lived, what one has done and what our deeds have done to us. To some, self-examination may come off as either self-indulgence or “beating oneself up.” To the evolving person, it is a necessary discipline enabling one to deepen and grow.

This would not be the only place where one could re-read a geographical passage into a temporal one. Since the Middle Ages, Jewish communities have inaugurated the Sabbath liturgically by reciting Psalm 95. It concludes (v. 11): “They shall not enter My resting place.” In context, the passage explains that the generation who experienced the Exodus tested and provoked YHVH and so were not deemed ready or worthy to enter in YHVH’s “resting place,” the Promised Land. Reading the psalm, we are encouraged to exhibit deeper faith and greater loyalty to merit this. In the context of the Sabbath, however, G!d’s resting place,

²¹⁵ *Mikra’ot G’dolot*, 3:18a.

the Promised Land, is no longer a geographical location but a spiritual place in time, the Sabbath, that the individual can enter into or not. Those who entered with a closed mind, of course, may yet leave with an open heart, for by beginning worship with this psalm the individual has a chance to hear the message and re-enter the Sabbath space in time differently.

This “modern” reading seems understood, or at least supported, by *Genesis Rabbah*.²¹⁶ There²¹⁷ we find a discussion of G!d’s cryptic words to Cain, *im teitiv s’eit*, “If you bring goodness—**uplift**.”²¹⁸

Rabbi Berechiah taught in Rabbi Shim’on bar Ammi’s name: “*L’David*. A Life Lesson. Evolving are those whose defiance is **lifted** (*n’sui*), whose straying gets re-tracked.” This means: What constitutes a person’s evolving is that the person stands taller than their defiance and does not let their defiance stand taller than they.

Rabbi Berechiah’s teaching understands the word *s’eit*, “uplift,” as from the same root (*nasa*) as “lifted.” Rabbi Berechiah contends that a major source of “uplift” is that which comes from “lifting” up one’s lives through finding not merely one’s spiritual grounding but one’s spiritual direction. That only comes from constant attention to one’s inner life. This involves the kind of self-examination that the psalmist undergoes. Ultimately this kind of spiritual attention will enable one to stand tall and proud. When one neglects one’s inner life, one’s worries, regrets, hurts, guilt, and one’s sense of shame eventually overwhelms the person and make them “smaller.” Those feelings “stand taller” than the person. Note that

²¹⁶ A rabbinic midrash, that was compiled c. 400-600 CE, and which combines line-by-line commentary, parables, popular sayings and legal principles. It contains material from as early as the 3rd c. CE.

²¹⁷ *Sefer Midrash Rabbah*, I:50a; see Harry Freedman, *Genesis*, vols. 1-2 of *Midrash Rabbah* [The Great Midrash], ed. Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, 3rd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1983), 184.

²¹⁸ Gn 4:7.

Rabbi Berechiah takes YHVH out of the equation of affirmation/forgiveness when he contends that affirmation/forgiveness or, here, the “lifting” of our “defiance” is something that we must do, for it is under our control. Indeed, one can understand Rabbi Berechiah’s interpretation of G!d’s words to Cain as, “If you want to bring goodness (to your life), you lift up (your own burdens)!”

“Standing up tall” in life is not something that others, even G!d, can do for anyone; it is each person’s to achieve, over and over again, in the small things and in the big things, by how one navigates the task of ensuring that one’s inner spiritual life and one’s vision of who one wishes to be is matched on the outside by the way one approaches life and how one interrelates with others and with G!d. The task is arduous, the journey constant; taking in both Rabbi Berechiah’s teaching and the psalmist’s experience enables the listener or reader to see that the confrontation with all that haunts a person is precisely what will ultimately provide one with “uplift” and *b’tsur y’rom’meini*, set one’s life higher and higher than they have ever been. Each of us can stand tall again.

Ranei falet/euphoric refrains of rescue

In line with Murphy the plural phrase *euphoric refrains of rescue* could refer to the family, friends, neighbors, and fellow congregants sharing in the joy of the psalmist’s safety.²¹⁹ The word *ranei* is often translated as “gladness,” but such a translation misses conveying the plural construction, the only place in Tanakh where this word is found in the plural. I have used “euphoric refrains,” but perhaps one could use an English neologism such as “gladnesses” so that we do

²¹⁹ Murphy, 86.

not pass by this word too quickly. The use of the plural, to me, seems a deliberate counterpoint to the “torridity”, literally “torridities,” of v. 4.

The “euphoria” of *ranei* gets compounded not merely by the unusual plural form but also from the fact that it follows the verb *tits-reini*. The striking assonance of *(tits-)reini ronei* helps convey the depth and intensity of the psalmist’s mood following the offering of acknowledgment and admission and the receiving of forgiveness. The “gladnesses” of the plural construction of *ron*, then, become multiplied even more through this assonance. In a corollary way the deliverance of the verb *tits-reini*, too, receives strengthening from this same assonance.

Chapter 5: The Call to Community (Vv. 8-11)

The Encouragement to Others (Vv. 8-10)

We have now discussed how the psalmist went through three stages after finding the self not aligned with the heart:

Awareness. The psalmist refuses for some time look at the concern or behavior. For a considerable period of time the episode gnaws at the psalmist's soul, with attendant physical symptoms, until the psalmist comes to awareness of who the self is and how one's behavior has not aligned up with the self.

Acknowledgment. A thorough self-examination leads the psalmist to realize that some acknowledgment of the psalmist's life or admission of the psalmist's role in relationship is necessary in order to try to set matters "right" and perhaps reconstitute the relationship with more integrity or to make amends and to seek forgiveness. After preparing for the moment, the psalmist does indeed make such public acknowledgment and admission to G'd and feels an instantaneous sense of release and relief, and a sense of joy when the relationship is reconciled through G'd's decision to forgive.

Going public. That sense of joy propels the psalmist to share this important life experience with the community in the hopes that the community, and each person within it, will draw an appropriate lesson for each to pursue.

These next verses present the formalized *maskil*, if you will, of the entire experience of the psalmist, one that incorporates all three stages of vv. 3-7. The three-stage process constitutes what the psalmist calls "the way of the exemplary (*tzaddik*)."¹ The psalmist now offers personal encouragement, which includes a

¹ Ps 1:6.

charge to those who avoid taking in and taking on the lesson and, rather, remain in a stubborn posture, which becomes not merely foolish or self-centered but demeaning to oneself in its refusal to accept the need for self-reflection, affirmation or forgiveness, or for instruction. Such a person cannot grow, and such a person misses out on the best that life can offer. This encouragement is offered through the format of a formalized piece of instruction, not entirely dissimilar from the book of Proverbs or some other wisdom teaching.

Askil-cha v'or-cha...i-a-tsal

I share, offer...will not close

Verse 8 begins by offering a sequence of three verbs: *askil-cha*, “I share my example,” *v'or-cha*, “and offer my lesson,” and *i-atsa alecha eini*, “I will not close an eye to your life.” These verbs do not indicate a demand or insistence such as “do this” or “attend to such-and-such.”² The psalmist cannot give an instruction manual. Rather, the verbs seem to answer the need of those wanting to integrate the full lesson: “Fill me with the proper outlook,” or “put me in the attitude in which I will naturally, or more easily, do what I ought to do—what’s right for me, what gets me on the *derech* (“life-path”) that is marked with my name.”

The first term shares the same root as *maskil*, “life-lesson” (v. 1), while the second term shares the same root as *Torah*, “Instruction.” One gives a life-lesson by offering up one’s own experience, that is, by “sharing one’s example,” which is true *Torah*. One learns such a lesson not by mimicking but by considering, appropriating and making another’s *maskil* their very own.

² Van Doren and Samuel, 156.

The pedagogical nature of the passage has led to some speculation as to who the speaker here is. Some modern commentators suggest that the speaker here is the Deity.³ They were preceded in this speculation by Rashi, who suggests that this describes what G!d spoke to David, the reputed author of this psalm.⁴ Other moderns offer that the speaker here is the psalmist, who offers the community the lesson.⁵ They, too, were preceded in this judgment by Radak, who suggests that this passage contains what David offers to teach others what he has learned from personal experience.⁶

I follow the latter line of thinking, that the speaker of the verse is not the Deity but the implied speaker or psalmist, regardless of who the actual author(s) may have been. The life lesson is best taught not from a textbook by someone who has not undergone the experience that ultimately led to such personal growth, and the life lesson cannot be dictated or promulgated by G!d. Rather, the life lesson is best taught by the person whose experience evoked the spiritual growth that produced the life lesson. The community that hears, absorbs, and integrates that life lesson can transmit it from generation to generation, where each generation ironically affirms the life lesson by making it its own through its peculiar life experience.

The three verbs we noticed that indicate a life lesson form a bracket with the sequence of three verbal forms indicating affirmation or forgiveness in the opening two verses: *n'sui*, "to lift," *k'sui*, "to re-track," and *lo yach-shov*, "to

³ See, for example, VanGemeren, 274, and Murphy, 86.

⁴ Danziger, 64.

⁵ See, for example, Delitzsch, 254.

⁶ This is how Danziger understands Radak. See Danziger, 64.

account (no distortion).” These verbs themselves countered the sequence of three nouns designating not living up to who one is or one’s best: *pesha*, “defiance,” *chata’ah*, “straying/getting off track,” and *avon*, “distortion.” By juxtaposing three verbs of affirmation or forgiveness with three verbs of instruction the Psalmist seems to argue that affirmation or forgiveness is not a momentary feeling or an end in itself but a learning experience, a growth experience, which hopefully brings us to a new posture and position in regard to our life and toward life itself.⁷

Thus two sets of three verbal forms bracket the core of the psalm, which contains the psalmist’s experience. That core contains three sections indicating the three stages of the psalmist’s experience. As I have shown, that middle section, verse 5, contains precisely three verbs for the psalmist’s admission, *odi-a-cha*, “I hereby announce,” *lo chisiti*, “I no longer hide,” and *amarti*, “I now declare.” This leads us to see more fully the artistry of this composition: The three major sections of the psalm are each signaled and controlled by a series of three verbs to point up the psalm’s major themes.

Derech/the path

Life is a journey. The word *derech* in wisdom literature conveys this. The word often means a metaphoric “path.”

D’rachecha, YHVH, hodi-eini...**hadri-cheini** va-amit-cha.
Announce to me, YHVH, Your **path**...**direct my path** to Your truth.⁸

The point I wish to emphasize here is that *derech* often means “path” in the

⁷ Davidson, 112.

⁸ Ps 25:4, 5.

sense of the metaphoric “path of life” on which a person journeys every day. The path to discovering one’s truth is not geographic. In the example, the verb cooperates in conveying this meaning: The phrase “direct my path” represents the Hebrew verb (a single word) with the same root as *derech*, “path.” The same joining of noun and verb can be found later in the same psalm, vv. 8-9. The first phrase, “Announce to me, YHVH, Your path” is not dissimilar to Ps 119:33:

Hodi-eini YHVH, **derech** chukecha
Announce to me, YHVH, **the path** of your regulations.

Psalms 119 uses the term *derech* 13 times. It speaks of specific paths, none literal: “the path of Your testimonies” (v. 14), “the path of Your precepts” (v. 27), “the path of deceit” (v. 29), “the path of faith” (v. 30), “path of Your commandments” (v.32). All of these paths are those upon which humans cannot literally walk. The term “path” thus connotes—often, even usually—a nonliteral meaning.

Psalm 32 and Psalm 1

That same psalm, Psalm 119, refers to G!d’s paths in vv. 3, 5, 33, 37. Elsewhere therein (vv. 26, 59, 168) the psalmist connects, or hopes to align, the psalmist’s personal path with G!d’s. The very first verse of the psalm sets the tone for all of these:

Ashrei t’mimei **derech**, ha-hol-chim b’torat YHVH.
Evolved are the pure of **path**, those who walk with YHVH’s teaching.

Here the psalmist suggests that the more one walks an honest and honorable “pure path,” the more one walks faithfully attuned to Divine guidance and aligned with Divine purposes. The reverse is also true: The more one walks

attuned to one's spiritual core, the more one walks a path of integrity. In either case, those who continually (strive to) do so "evolve."

It seems to me not a stretch to consider this in some ways the very intention and hope of the entire book of Psalms. To demonstrate this, one needs to consider the very opening verse of the very psalm that opens the psalter (Ps 1:1).⁹

*Ashrei-ha'ish lo halach ba-atzat r'sha'im
uv'derech chata'im lo amad
uv'moshav leitsim lo yashav.*

Evolved is the person who did not walk with the counsel of evil people
and on the **path** of those straying did not remain
and in the seat of the scoffers did not sit.

This verse suggests that the first psalm involves staying away from paths that lead to a hindrance of one's personal growth.

The word also appears twice in the final verse of the same psalm (1:6):

Ki yo-dei-a YHVH derech tsaddikim v'derech r'sha'im toved.
For YHVH knows the **life-path** of the exemplary, but the **life-path** of the
wayward is a lost one.

This verbal resonance within a small block of text is more powerful here than it might be elsewhere. Since these constitute the first and last verses of a text that begins and introduces the entire psalter, these retain their memory and influence on our hearing and reading of every other psalm. The word *derech*, "life-path," at the beginning and end of Psalm 1, then, serves as bookends, enveloping the entire passage to highlight the interests of the psalm.

Psalm 1 shares language and themes with our psalm. This first verse shares three key terms: *ashrei* ("evolved"), *derech* ("path"), and *chatta'im*

⁹ I cited this verse above in my discussion of the term *ashrei*. See above, 28 and 33.

(“strayers”), which in Psalm 32 appears in a different form, *chata’a* (“straying”).

The phrase, *derech chatta’im*, then, becomes a wry opening to the book of Psalms, acknowledging that the “evolved person” does not get on the path of “those who get off the path.” One should not get off of one’s life path as if they are still on it. Such a person is “lost,” at least for the moment. Getting back on will require deep thinking about where one is now located in life and more deep thinking about how to find one’s way, acknowledging in all this where one has gone and doing what one can to change, rectify and ameliorate one’s life situation. I find resonance here as well with Ps 119:59, *chishav-ti d’rachai*, “I (re)considered my life’s paths,” that is “I thought through all the paths I have taken in life” so that I can be sure I am currently on the right one for me. Self-reflection is essential for a healthful spiritual life. When we think through (*chashav*) our life-path, then G!d will not impute (*lo yach-shov*) the twists and turns we take along the way as twistedness (*avon*).

In Psalm 32 these same three terms, *ashrei*, *derech*, and *chata’a* surround the core of the psalm, vv. 3-7, which tells of the three stages the psalmist experienced, or journeyed, from the suffering that the straying or other wrongful behavior incurred, through the acknowledgement and admission the psalmist offers publicly, and, finally, through the sharing of the experience which brings release and deep joy to the psalmist with the community.

However these the last two terms are found in a different order in Psalm 32, and they are separated by the core passage. This might indicate that the one who has taken the journey will have a sense that, looking back, the *chata’a* is far

behind them and now belongs to that part of their life before they took up that part of the journey. This also indicates to the life-journeyer that, looking ahead, all is glad potential and bright hope. Not seeing what turns one's path may take or what lies beyond, one takes in the current landscape. Knowing what one has just come through, one knows that when faced with whatever might be ahead, one can do it again. Indeed, having gone through something once, we feel emotionally and spiritually better equipped for the next time.

Thus one need not worry where the road ends when one finds oneself as *ashrei* on one's life-path. In Psalm 32 the sense of *ashrei* that is felt in the opening section (vv. 1-2) and encouraged in the closing section (vv. 8-11) points to the importance of the human journey we all should take—struggling to regain our footing on the life-path whose street sign bears only our own name and then walking on it with integrity and in great joy.

Furthermore, the list of three general actions that mark the “evolving person” of Psalm 1 have a correspondence with three more defined acts that the “evolved person” of Psalm 32 might commit but for which such a person receives one of the three types of affirmation or forgiveness (vv. 1-2). That affirmation or forgiveness comes as part of the three stages the psalmist undergoes in vv. 3-7, highlighted in v. 5 by a statement of admission that involves three action verbs, which helps us to understand why the closing life-lesson of vv. 8-10 begins with three active verbs of teaching. This accumulated chain of three becomes rhetorically powerful. Yet powerful counsel, even when appreciated by and resonating within a person is not always followed, so the centerpiece of this

overall lesson directs itself to human stubbornness in v. 9.

i-a-tsa alecha eini

I will not close an eye to your life

The tone of this phrase indicates that the speaker wishes to do something or offer something lovingly to the community. Just what this means, however, remains difficult, although it must continue the thought of the previous two phrases, “I will share my example” and “offer my lesson.” Thus many commentators interpret the verb as from the root *y'-ts*, with *alecha eini* attached to it. They thus interpret the text on the order of “I will counsel you with my own sight” or “I will counsel you, my eye steadfastly upon you,”¹⁰ the latter phrase, perhaps signaling a degree of protection.¹¹ Others understand the same root but understand *alecha eini* as a subordinate relative clause: “fixing my eye upon you,” that is, lovingly, taking a keen interest in your life.¹² The Masoretic accentuation offers another possibility: *eini* as an adverbial form, yielding “I will counsel you with my eye” or “I will counsel you observantly,” that is, counsel that presumably stems directly from the psalmist’s own life situation and not just some advice from a lofty, distant perch or from an instruction manual.

Hirsch suggests that *ayin*, “eye,” means not merely “eye” in a literal sense but “the state of things as perceived by the eye,” which can, by extension, refer to “what I myself have perceived, my own experience.”¹³ For support he turns to Nm 11:7, where manna is described: *v'eino k'ein hab'dolach*, literally, “its eye is like

¹⁰ See Alter, 111; Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, 182; and VanGemeren, 274.

¹¹ This is how Craigie understands the term. See Craigie, 267.

¹² See Delitzsch, 254.

¹³ Hirsch, 229.

the eye of bdellium” but clearly the phrase signifies “its appearance resembles the appearance of bdellium.”¹⁴ Thus, Hirsch renders the phrase, “I would advise you from my own experience.”

One major problem, however, with these interpretations is that *ya’atz al* always intends, in every other case, a confrontational attitude toward another.

So, for example, we find in Is 7:5:

Ya’an ki **ya’atz alecha** Aram ra’ah
Because the Arameans **plotted against you**.

So, too, Jer 49:30:

Nusu nudu m’od he’miku lashevet yosh-vei chatsor, n’um YHVH ki **ya’atz aleichem** N’vuchad-retsar melech-Bavel eitsa v’chasav aleichem machashavah.
“Flee! Wander very far off, O inhabitants of Hatzor”—the speech of YHVH—“for Nebuchadnezzar, Babylonia’s king, **is plotting** quite some plot **against you** and scheming against you quite a scheme.

Indeed, the usual proper form of advising someone—and not against someone—does not use any preposition and is also well-attested. So, for example, Jer 38:15:

Ki agid l’cha halo hamet t’miteini; v’chi **i-atz-cha** lo tish-ma eilai.
For when I tell you, you will surely put me to death;
and when **I advise you**, you do not pay heed to me.

So, too, 1 Kgs 1:12:

V’ata l’chi **i-atzech na eitzah**;
umal’ti et naf-shech v’et nefesh b’nech Sh’lomo.
Now, come, **I am offering you advice**,
so you may save your life and the life of your son Solomon.

For these reasons, the *BDB* suggests amending the phrase *i-atza alecha* to *i-atz-cha*.¹⁵ This proposed emendation does indeed align the written text with the

¹⁴ Hirsch also cites Ez 1:7, 27.

requirements of the usage of the verb. However, such an emendation receives no manuscript support.

Additionally, I find a difficulty with the concept here. Usually offering counsel and giving advice is a matter of verbal or written communication. How, precisely, does one offer counsel with one's eyes? And why, here, would one offer counsel with only one "eye"? If one can theoretically see only about half as much with one eye as with two, would not someone's counsel that is derived from seeing only half the picture constitute advice that is partial, incomplete, and given without fullness of thought or consideration? Clearly these implications of the proposed understanding, and the proposed emendation, raise as many problems as they solve.

The other possible root would be the less common *ayin-tsadi-heh*, meaning "to shut." This root is attested in the *qal* in Prv 16:30:

Otse einav lach-shov ta'puchot; korei s'fatav kila ra'ah.
(That one) **closes the eyes** while contemplating deceptions;
(That one) purses the lips while determining evil.

The root appears as well in the in the *pi'el*, in Is 29:10:

Ki nasach aleichem YHVH ru-ach tar-demah **vay'atsem et eineichem** et han'vi'im v'et rashechem ha-chozim kisah.
For YHVH has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep **and has shut your eyes**—the prophets, and your heads—the seers—(YHVH) has covered.

In both cases what gets shut are precisely "eyes." This reading finds further support from the Septuagint, which apparently translates from a reading of *e-e-tse*, *I will shut*.

Nonetheless, this root remains problematic in context. In both passages

¹⁵ BDB, 419.

cited (Isaiah and Proverbs), the shutting of the eyes has a negative connotation. If the message of the verse up till now is that the speaker is offering life-wisdom, why would the speaker now shift gears and state something negative. If one understands this as a positive encouragement, how would the shutting of eyes be helpful? The refusal to see would seem to intend precisely the opposite of what every one should do. While it could be argued that the encouragement offered here is that those listening do not truly need the support of the psalmist because they each have the inner fortitude to go through this process alone, I argue that nonetheless the refusal to offer support by shutting one's eyes is in itself not a statement of encouragement and could hardly be received as such.

I propose a different tack: to read the word *i-atsa* not as a single word, but two, with *i* the adverb “not.” I thus render the phrase, “I will not close my eye to you.” While the use of the adverb *i* is much more common in later rabbinic material, we do find it within Tanakh. So, after the priest Eli dies his son Pinchas and his wife have a son which Eli's daughter-in-law names Ichabod.¹⁶ The text, *ad locus*, explains the name as negative:

Vatikra lana'ar **i-kavod** leimor galah chavod mi-Yisra'el,
il hilakach aron ha-Elohim v'el chamiha v'ishah.
She named the boy **Ichabod**, meaning, “Exiled is all glory from Israel,”—
with reference to the Ark of G'd, to (the death of) her father-in-law and her husband.”

Thus the idea of reading *i-atsa alecha eini* as four words, not three, meaning, “I will not shut my eye toward you” would render better sense of the phrase in context. The psalmist, having gone through a tremendous spiritually

¹⁶ 1 Sm 4:21. See also 1 Sm 14:3.

allow themselves the opportunity to have their own cathartic experience. In doing so, with *chesed*, “loving kindness,” the psalmist assures everyone in the community that should they, too, take on the process of self-examination and follow through on whatever discoveries they might make, the psalmist will not shut even one eye from keeping them grounded, from ensuring that they feel cared for along the way, and that the psalmist will continue to care for them no matter where the journey takes them. After all, the psalmist has just spoken of what the journey did to the psalmist’s own being. Self-examination and spiritual deepening do not come easily or always joyfully. Yet the psalmist wants them to take up that spiritual journey because it ultimately makes the person more fulfilled and more satisfied; the journey makes us better people. That is part of what the psalmist has learned from the psalmist’s own self, and wanting to make even one person’s journey feel a little easier and a little more supported than perhaps that of the psalmist shows how the psalmist has grown and deepened.

If this reading is correct, this clause then serves as a word of reassurance from the psalmist to the speaker. While this reading remains unattested in the manuscripts and versions, this proposal at least has several benefits. First, the proposal does not at all affect the consonantal text. It merely would propose a space between letters. One could hypothesize easily that an early copyist saw the two words *i atza* and immediately recalled the much more common root “to counsel” and merely put what was two words into one by closing the space. Even more so, it would then suggest that this verse, the key verse of this section, contains precisely three verbs of sharing one’s *maskil*, one’s life-lesson so that

contains precisely three verbs of sharing one's *maskil*, one's life-lesson so that others might learn: *askil-cha*, *v'or-cha* and *i atsa*. Note that the first two are in a positive formulation and the latter in a negative one. This is precisely what we found in the opening section with three verbal forms of affirmation or forgiveness: *n'sui*, *k'sui* and *lo yach-shov*. We also found this in the key verse of the middle section,¹⁷ although there with the negative form appeared not last but second: *odi-a-cha*, *lo chisiti*, *amarti*. In this key verse the three verbs appear consecutively to serve as an analogy to the process the psalmist undergoes: stop hiding, start figuring things out, that is articulation, and then acknowledgment, or owning up to who one has been or to what one has done. Those verbs, then, highlight the end of silence and deception, the miracle of verbalization, and the courage of admission. Our verbs here also bespeak of a three-part sequence of what the psalmist now offers the community: my lesson, my guidance as each tries to find their own path, and my continual care and support throughout the difficult, if rewarding process.

Al tih'yul(So) do not be

Verse 9 begins with *al tih'yu*, "Don't you all be," a plural form which contrasts with the singular antecedent (four times) of v. 8. Perhaps this is explained by ensuring that each and every person—the entire community—is included in the exhortation and encouragement "to come clean."¹⁸ The lesson is not directed to "the other guy," but to me. While this note of encouragement sounds commanding, it is surely not presumptuous, because, as McCann notes,

¹⁷ V. 5.

¹⁸ VanGemeren, 275.

the psalmist does not “witness” or call attention to any personal righteousness but, rather, to Divine loving kindness.¹⁹

K’sus k’fered/like a horse or mule

The biblical writers do use animals as moral examples.²⁰ So, for example, in Is 1:2-3:

Hear, o Heavens and give ear, O earth for YHVH spoke:
 “Children I reared and I raised—and they rebelled against Me!”
 Its buyer an ox knows; an ass its owner’s crib.
 Israel does not know—My people evinces no understanding.

We find a not dissimilar passage in Jer 8:6-7:

They do not speak thus, not even one person regrets their evil deed.
 They all give in again and again to their willful waywardness,
 like a horse dashing forward in war.
 The stork in the heavens, too, knows her seasons,
 And the turtledove, the swift and the crane keep the time of their coming;
 But My people do not know YHVH’s judgment.

This phenomenon must remain in view as we look to v. 9.

Al tih’yu k’sus k’fered...k’rov eilecha/So do not be

like a horse or mule...otherwise, not nearing you.

Horse and mule cannot be kept under control and close at hand except by the use of bit and bridle. So, too, the one listening to the psalmist can turn away like work animals who do not heed words and require bridle and whip to move. The psalmist’s urging is the “performative bit and bridle.”²¹ If the psalmist’s personal story has not motivated them to do so, perhaps the psalmist’s command will get them to see the connection between the psalmist’s own past journey and, hopefully, their future one.

¹⁹ McCann, 806.

²⁰ Limburg, 104.

²¹ Levine, 99.

For this analogy we might also refer to Prv 26:3:

Shot **lasus**, meteg **lachamor**; v'sheivet l'gav k'silim.
A whip for a **horse**, a bridle for a **donkey**, and a rod for the back of fools.”

Note as well, Sir 30:8:

An unbroken **horse** turns out stubborn,
and an unchecked child turns out headstrong.

While animals exhibit intractability, humans, endowed with intelligence, know nuance, and show flexibility. Then, too, while animals act out of instinct (primarily), humans can think and discern, so that humans, not animals, have the ability to reconsider and to rekindle relationships, including that which one has with the Holy One.²²

Levine senses a note of ridicule here, since the animals involved are not kosher for either the altar or the table!²³ Obstinacy and stubbornness are not enviable character traits, especially when they block personal growth. In this sense, they are not kosher! Of concern here, in any event, is the wildness of the two beasts of burden which remain totally ungovernable without bit and bridle. We humans can resemble the work animal in the wrong place: we need to get back on the *derech*, the right “life-path” (v.8) for us. Sometimes we cannot or will not do this on our own.

bal k'rov eilecha/otherwise, not nearing you

This phrase seems somewhat clumsy, for it remains unclear to what this phrase attaches itself or if the phrase is meant as a warning or an assurance.²⁴

²² Rozenberg and Zlotowitz, 185.

²³ Levine, 99.

²⁴ Miller, “The Psalms,” 758.

Rashi contends that this refers to the horse or the mule that might be nearing the psalmist to render harm.²⁵ Ostensibly the animal may try to harm the psalmist because it wishes to end the discomfort it now endures and may consider the psalmist as the source of the discomfort. Alternatively, if we follow the approach that the horse or mule experiences discomfort, it might approach the psalmist because it deems the psalmist as the solution.

Delitzsch understands the phrase as “otherwise there is no coming near to you.”²⁶ That is, if you do not use the bit and bridle, the animal will not get where it should nor will it necessarily approach a human. They explain that, similarly, those who get off the right *derech*, “life-path,” will not go near G'd, even when G'd may be their only hope. Sometimes agony, inner and outer, must be endured before either animal or human will find itself willing to get into a more positive and productive state and posture.

The subject of *bal k'rov eilecha*, “to preclude nearing you,” may not be the horse or the mule. The phrase, after all, follows the *et-nach-ta* in the cantillation. Thus, we might suggest G'd cannot approach those who stubbornly stick to the personal status quo and remain spiritually unattuned. We could further suggest that people who so close off their spirituality may not fully let life, and its fullness of joy, come near them, let alone suffuse them. When we remain still on the path of life, we do not get anywhere and miss out. As the psalmist states it,²⁷

Todi-eini orach chayyim sova s'machot et panecha
 N'imot bimin-cha netsach.
 Show me (my) life path, for fullness of joys are found in Your Presence,

²⁵ *Mikra'ot G'dolat*, 3:21a.

²⁶ Delitzsch, 255.

²⁷ Ps 16:11.

However one precisely understands *bal k'rov eilecha*, the animals in the metaphor stand for people in the community, who upon hearing the lesson, might behave like the mule or the horse just as the psalmist once did. The psalmist had been wild and ungovernable and unable to rein in the self.

Ibn Ezra asserts that the intention of this verse is *chalilah l'cha mi'yot k'sus*, that the listener or reader “should not become” close to behaving “like a horse” or a mule while on his or her life’s journey.²⁸ Rather, one must be open to how all of life—its joys and its sorrows, its sweetness and its bitterness—can touch one deeply, move a person, and teach, so that one not only goes but grows through life.

Thus the psalmist now urges those in the community to transcend their animal natures and take proper direction by affirming and shoring up their trust in G!d (v. 10) which can be made manifest through their allowing themselves to be vulnerable through searching themselves, acknowledging who they are and admitting any missteps. Those who trust in G!d know a different control which keeps them close to G!d, namely G!d’s *chesed*, “loving kindness.” In this we should note Ps 5:8:

Va'ani b'rov **chas-d'cha** avo veitecha.
And I—through Your abundance of **loving kindness**—
I can come into Your house.

The right “path” of v. 8, one learns in v. 10, includes trusting in G!d so that one can be surrounded by G!d’s *chesed*. Openness can lead to trust which can lead to the restoration of relationship.

²⁸ *Mikra'ot G'dolot*, 3:21a.

Rabim mach'ovim la-rasha

Mighty are the sorrows of the wayward

This phrase both looks backward and forward at the same time. *Rabim*, “mighty,” clearly echoes the same word in v. 6. The *rasha*, the “wayward,” is the counterpart of the *tzaddik*, the “exemplary,” in v. 11.

The traditional translation of “wicked,” in addition to any unintended Christian overlay,²⁹ sounds too judgmental to be helpful. The *BDB* suggests that the base meaning is “loose,” that is, not fully ordered and not “together.” Such a person finds themselves and life *tohu va-vohu*, chaotic matter which they need to re-shape into something more ordered, something of which the person can make sense.³⁰ The word “wayward” indicates that this person has gone “away” from the direction they should have or “away” from whom they might become.³¹ One may have become wayward due to willfulness, capriciousness, weakness or to something else. The judgment by others of another’s wayward state as “wicked” does not help the other and suggests that those judgmental others have more journeying to do on their own respective life-paths.

With regard to the phrase *rabim mach'ovim la-rasha*, Metzudat David holds that suffering, at least sometimes, can serve as chastisement.³² The wayward do not take on this suffering appropriately, and so experience suffering as a series of blows and hurts that come repeatedly, even continuously. Their sufferings are *rabim*, “many,” and the wayward can detail virtually all of them for anyone who

²⁹ See above, 8-10.

³⁰ Gn 1:2.

³¹ wayward. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1). Random House, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/wayward> (accessed September 20, 2009).

³² See Metzudat David in *Mikra'ot G'dolat*, 3:21a. See also Danziger, 65.

rabim, “many,” and the wayward can detail virtually all of them for anyone who will listen. Those who “trust in the Holy One,” however, will be “surrounded by loving kindness”³³ and relieved of their suffering. Not that they will not have suffering, but they may experience sufferings differently, take them in and appropriate them. According to Metzudat David, then, they do not feel all their sufferings as sufferings but as part of life, so that the actual times they count as suffering are fewer. Metzudat David’s point of view is that our outlook on life and approach to it can determine, at least in part, to what degree we experience life as misery or joy.

The Malbim,³⁴ on the other hand, understands the word *rabim* not as “many” sufferings, but as “mighty” sufferings, that is, exceedingly painful.³⁵ For him, this contrasts with those who “trust in the Holy One.” Such people live with a constant awareness that “loving kindness surrounds them.” Because of this awareness, the pain of their suffering is mitigated. Such persons allow all of life to go through them, and their openness and willingness to live with vulnerability, enable them not only to experience life more deeply but to grow as they live. For the Malbim, then, those who live with tremendous spiritual grounding do not take on suffering as something “mighty” that causes life to overwhelm them.

Albo offers another interpretation in his classic *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*.³⁶

What we consider good may not be good....it is possible that good things that come to a person are bad since the person may make oneself sick and ache over it and constantly feel anxious or worried. This correlates with the

³³ V. 10b.

³⁴ Acronym of **Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel** Weiser, 1809-1879), the Russian Malbim, a noted preacher, became Chief Rabbi of Rumania. His commentary incorporates midrash.

³⁵ See Danziger, 65.

³⁶ Albo, 4:1, 106.

statement of our Sages of blessed memory, “Increase possessions, increase anxiety”³⁷ and correlates as well with the statement of David, “Many are the sorrows of the wayward.”

Here Albo suggests that the word *rabim* in our verse, which he cites, signifies that “in many ways” or “through many things” the wayward may experience trouble and sorrow in life. If one places an inappropriate amount of attention on such matters as career advancement, accumulation of wealth, and gaining social status, one may ultimately be not enjoying life but adding undue burdens to it. When one places such matters in proper perspective, one will not devote undue emotional and spiritual energy toward achieving such matters. In such cases, the wayward may not ever “achieve such matters” for they may always feel that they do not yet have enough.

Albo’s thought could even be extended to any item, no matter how good it may appear on the surface. If we place too high a priority on other persons, even family, we may end up neglecting ourselves—our own health, physical or spiritual. In Jewish tradition, it is possible to place even too high a concern on depth of trust and faith in G!d. Many Chassidic teachings, especially, attest that one can give too much attention to virtue. So, for example, in one account Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sasov exhorts his followers that if they find someone in dire need of help that they should not deny them, putting them off with pious words, such as “Have faith! Trust in G!d who will surely help you.” Rather, Rabbi Moshe urges, they should act as if G!d does not even exist, as if the only beings in the world at that moment are the one in need and those around, and so those around must help.³⁸

³⁷ Mishnah, *Pirkei Avot* 2:7.

When we find ourselves not in balance and worrying constantly about one or two things to the near exclusion of all else, we need to stop and look inward about our need to give so much attention and energy to these few items. Such obsessing is not healthful and may indicate a codependent or addictive personality.

Excursus 6: Waywardness and Society

However one understands the force of adjective *rabim*, the sorrows surely relate to the spiritual degeneration, and the accompanying physical deterioration, that ensues when one tries to hide from one's past, from one's self and/or from one's deeds. The repression, the angst, the shame and the guilt do not constitute a set of religious wrongs, as traditionally conceived. Rather, as Brueggemann contends, wrongdoing may well concern modern ideologies which "reduce life to management" and reduce Divine holiness to a "set of niceties."³⁹ The return to relationship and the coming again to community here involve "a programmatic critique of our culture which binds us into restlessness and weakness,"⁴⁰ which supports us in laziness with regard to responsibility, clarity, and acknowledgment.

The current American sociocultural landscape seems to encourage us to "deny, suppress, and cover up all in the name of competence, prosperity, and success." This psalm, then, understands how one's cultural milieu does not

³⁸ See Abraham J. Karp, *For Modern Minds and Hearts: Prayers, Readings and Meditations for the High Holidays* (Bridgeport, CT: Prayer Book Press of Media Judaica, 1971), 45; cited in Sidney Greenberg and Jonathan D. Levine, *Mahzor Hadash (The New Mahzor) for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur*, enhanced ed. (Bridgeport, CT: Prayer Book Press, 1995), 855.

³⁹ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 98.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

automatically nurture the individual or the community but, far too often, undermines both. One could point to many examples of the how the contemporary American setting deadens our spiritual core. Many Americans suspect that over many years crimes have been committed by the most powerful: out-of-control contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan, torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, secret wiretapping of fellow citizens, secret groups to carry out assassinations. Those contractors constitute a private military, which works alongside our own, but is better equipped and better paid. Our representatives in Congress regularly load bills inappropriately with pork projects, including military spending on items that even the military does not want, let alone needs. Indeed most of our representatives receive such monetary support from corporations through lobbyists in many industries, such as health care and insurance, that conducting business to promote the social weal and help the ordinary person seems almost impossible. Corporate executives receive unseemly bonuses even for job performance that would get ordinary workers fired. Virtually all radio stations are owned by three companies, who maintain a specific ideology, demurring on any "Fairness Doctrine." Television thinks more about how to promote glitz and glamour in the search for ratings rather than reporting news and delving into events. One rarely hears the phrase investigative journalism anymore. The public has grown so accustomed to such outrages that its collective moral compass has changed. Not only do we not regularly call those governing on behalf of the governed to account, but we acquiesce to their enacting laws and instituting policies and procedures designed to punish

whistleblowers, so that wrongdoers are never given enough impetus to confront themselves and make admission such that no one will ever dare to complain. The prophetic voice that speaks truth to power is sorely missing. As Brueggemann suggests, we need to create a (sub)culture that counters our current climate with its orientation toward “unyielding control.”⁴¹ The psalm finally commends: “yielding” and living in and living with vulnerability.

Chesed y’sov’venu/loving kindness surrounds them

Verse 10 on the surface seems out of context and presents a rather orthodox piety: The “righteous,” do well, the “wicked” do not. StuhlmueLLer notes how this seems to run counter to the experience of the author of Psalm 31 which immediately precedes our psalm.⁴² Obviously, what matters most to a community, what constitutes exemplariness and waywardness and how one understands “doing well” affects one’s viewpoint on such matters.

In the context of the Psalmist’s experience here, however, I read the statement differently. To me, the verse seems not to differentiate between two different types of people, but two different postures toward life that a person might assume, just as I have been discussing. As Brueggemann puts it, the psalmist presents the two options to the community.⁴³ One can resist assuming one’s responsibility and refuse to proffer an acknowledgment. This choice results in the person living in considerable ongoing pain, as the psalmist testifies to, as vividly described in vv. 3-4. Alternatively, one can experience the difficulty of

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² StuhlmueLLer, 406.

⁴³ Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 98.

taking on that responsibility and making admission but then living with G!d's considerable *chesed*, Divine loving kindness, as the psalmist reveals in vv. 5-7. One can choose either path because self-awareness depends upon spiritual practice and spiritual direction. However, only a life surrounded by *chesed* leads to fullness of "freedom and power and joy."

The verb "envelops" seems to look back to its use in v. 7. There *t'sov'veini*, "You surround me" constitutes not merely the final word of v. 7, exclusive of the musical notation *selah*, but concludes the entire middle section (vv. 3-7), the core of the psalm, in which the person who makes public admission and feels Divine forgiveness, feels the Shechinah's embrace surrounding them. Here the verb is not merely the final one of v. 10 but of the entire first half of the third section (vv. 8-10) which presents the psalmist's life lesson of the entire gamut of experience: The psalmist feels surrounded by loving kindness. Perhaps, for this Psalmist, one way to identify the Divine in our life is when one feels surrounded by, or suffused with, precisely such a feeling of loving kindness. Indeed, I already noted that the term *chassid* constitutes the precise center of the psalm.⁴⁴ One experiences the kindness of life and the kindness of others more easily when one stays true to their own spiritual core and life-path, and by so doing, one can live a life of kindness as well.

Our Psalm and the Thirteen Attributes of G!d

Verse 10 invites the listener or reader to think or look back at v. 7 because of the verbal similarities. I first notice the confluence of *chassid* and *chesed*. *Chesed* ("loving kindness") most concretely refers to the grounding of

⁴⁴ See above, 137.

relationship in loyalty and faithfulness. It evokes trust. G'd's *chesed* is a defining quality, an aspect of Divine love.⁴⁵ *Chassid*, "the kindness-seeking," appears thirty-two times in Tanakh, twenty-five of which appear in Psalms. It refers to a person whose bearing in all relationships and toward all of life emulates that of the Holy One. We might state, then, that the *chesed* in v. 10 is what the *chassid* of v. 7 hopes to get to experience in life,⁴⁶ a life suffused with kindness—kindness that one continually receives in life and kindness that one continually gives out as well.

The two verses also interconnect through the adjective *rabim*, ("many, mighty") and the verb *l'soveiv*, "to surround." A true *chassid*, the kind-striving person, is one who has taken in and integrates life's lessons, as in this *maskil*, and has undergone "a mighty turnaround," that is, such spiritual growth, even transformation, that they are indeed "mighty" within and constantly feel enveloped in HaShem's *chesed*.⁴⁷ HaShem forgives. It is no coincidence that the gamut of types of misguided life journeying enumerated in vv. 1-2 are the same as those enumerated by YHVH in the great self-disclosure to Moses on Mount Sinai:

YHVH, YHVH...nosei **avon va-fesha v'chata'ah**
YHVH, YHVH carries away **distortion, defiance and straying**.⁴⁸

Noting that passage, we find the linkage of *chesed* and *rabim* in our psalm

⁴⁵ Ex 34:6.

⁴⁶ Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms*, Word Biblical Themes (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 94. See also Delitzsch, 253.

⁴⁷ HaShem, literally "the Name," refers to the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of G'd, YHVH.

⁴⁸ Ex 34:6-7.

purposeful, for in that same magnificent Exodus passage, we are told that G!d is *rav chesed*, “mighty in loving kindness.”⁴⁹ The use of the plural *rabim* here in Ps 32:10 may well indicate that for the one who feels filled with positive affirmation or forgiveness, that G!d’s “loving kindness” feels even “mightier” than what was ever described and greater than what was ever imagined or could have been anticipated.

The roots of the words *nosei*, *avon*, *pesha*, and *chata’ah* appear in Exodus 34:7 in precisely the opposite order of Psalm 32:5. We should note the different perspective: in Exodus, it is the Deity’s perspective; here, it is the psalmist’s.⁵⁰ We should never mistake our perspective and experience when reaching out for return to our path and the reconstitution or restoration granted as equivalent to the Divine perspective and experience.⁵¹ Nor when we reconcile with another person and are in some way “one” again: it does not mean that our experiences, perspectives and feelings on the resolved matter are now the same. And there is another reason for this inverted word order, as I shall demonstrate.

This intertext gains particular resonance for the Jewish community. Ex 34:6-7 through the word *v’nakei*, “to clean” or “to empty,” is seen as describing the Thirteen Attributes of G!d (*sh’losh esrei midot*). The word *v’nakei* does not actually stand alone in its biblical context but forms part of the phrase *v’nakei lo y’nakei*, literally “empty (G!d) will not empty,” that is, will not “empty” us of all spiritual burden attendant to our misguided or ill-considered actions. The Jewish

⁴⁹ Ex 34:6.

⁵⁰ As I noted, Rambam in commending each person to offer admission, follows the order of our psalmist, perhaps intentionally so. See above, 106-9.

⁵¹ This may be the reason that Rambam’s formula for acknowledgment follows the psalmist’s. See above, 107-9.

liturgical use of that passage thus severs the verse after the first word so that *nakei* now becomes the final word of a series of the previous phrase, *nosei avon va-fesha v'chata'ah v'nakei*, meaning that G!d will indeed “empty us” of all such spiritual burdens when G!d “carries away” all psychic and spiritual pain associated with our “distortions,” our “defiance” and our “deviations” or “straying” from our life-path. The Jewish liturgical appropriation of the verse results in giving the passage the exact opposite meaning from that of its biblical provenance. G!d thus becomes *nosei avon va-fesha v'chata'ah*, not just somewhat but entirely, so that we feel *nakei*, “emptied” of our load. That G!d does do this becomes, then, the last of those Thirteen Attributes, and therefore the Attribute to which all the others point and lead. Since we have injured G!d, through our actions, the affirmation of these attributes helps to re-affirm, as it were, G!d’s self-worth. When I shut You out or I did or said what I did, it was not because You, G!d, were who You were or are. I realize now that I behaved as I did because of who I was. I have been examining my heart and searching my soul. I have come back to who I am, and I am now on track to, as in Your *maskil*/model, “become who I might become,” *ehye asher ehye*.⁵²

In Ex 3:14, G!d uses the phrase *ehye asher ehye* as a way for Moses to explain to the people who this unfamiliar deity, YHVH, actually is. The Tetragrammaton is related to the Hebrew verb *haya*, “to be” or “to exist.” G!d’s very own explanation, then, suggests that existence, living life, is a process of becoming who the One might become, and that description becomes a model for

⁵² Ex 3:14.

the people. They will live life most fully when they are striving to “become who they might become.” Such is the *derech*, the life-path of the spiritually attuned, a life that is evolving, a life that is *ashrei*.

So G!d is known as someone who *nosei*, “carries away,” all that which our struggles entail. The psalmist tells us of the psalmist’s personal and ultimately positive journey working on the wrongs the psalmist did and working on the consequences, personal and otherwise, of those actions. At Selihot services which inaugurate the High Season of Awe (*yamim nora’im*) and the High Holy Days and, especially, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Expiation, the recitation of the Thirteen Attributes occurs, and often, indeed, at every service. Jews must admit their wrongdoings, their struggles, their hurts—to a G!d they have hurt. Nonetheless, the “wounded” G!d, having been hurt by us can help carry away our burden because G!d knows what it is like to be wounded, as it were.

The affirmation of the Divine Attributes and, hence, our affirmation of G!d’s “personhood,” as it were, helps us to reconcile our relationship with G!d. Indeed reconcile comes from the Latin *reconciliare* meaning “to bring together again,” to unite again,” to make good again,” or “to repair.”⁵³ The one, in this case the One, who gives affirmation or grants forgiveness signals that such “repair” is not only possible but has actually started, that by “bringing” the one/One “back together” with the distancing or offending person despite the hurtful action, the two are “united” again in relationship, “making good” on their prior commitment and time

⁵³ Dictionary.comUnabridged, s.v. “reconcile,” and “conciliate,” Dictionary.com <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/reconcile> (accessed November 02, 2009) and <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/conciliate> (accessed on November 02, 2009). Based on the Random House Dictionary, 2009.

together, indeed their relationship. In Exodus 34 G!d *nosei...chata'ah*, lifts the straying of the people during the Golden Calf incident which breached the Covenant between G!d and the people and therefore breached their relationship.⁵⁴ There that straying was twice termed a *chata'ah g'dolah*, "a great straying."⁵⁵ The first time Moses, acting on G!d's behalf, informs the people of the Divine hurt out of the anger due to the betrayal; the second time Moses, acting on the people's behalf, informs G!d of the people's hurt out of sorrow and shame due to their thoughtless wrongful action. When G!d forgives them and proclaims the Thirteen Attributes, G!d shapes the communication to include the phrase so that the list of wrongdoings concludes with *chata'ah*, straying, to help assure the people that even their *chata'ah g'dolah*, their "great straying" in the Golden Calf incident has been carried away and so no longer separates them. The space between them has been made *nakei*, "emptied" of the spiritual load that the Golden Calf episode brought. Thus G!d can affirm, *hinei anochi coret b'rit neged kaw! am-cha*, "I hereby restore the Covenant with the entire people."⁵⁶ Everyone needed not merely to hear those words but to know that they were each personally included in them. G!d and the people may now not only move on, but they can move on together.

So, too, when we hurt another person, a breach separates us. As the distancing or offending party we must examine our actions, admit them contritely to the injured party and try to find ways to repair the breach. The longer we avoid any of these three parts, the more and bigger the breach grows. Once we do

⁵⁴ Ex 32.

⁵⁵ Ex 32:30-31.

⁵⁶ Ex 34:10.

these three, then the other party can work towards affirmation/forgiveness and reconciliation. If they do not, we will have avoided doing further damage to ourselves and can feel good about our attempts to rectify a wrong. If they do, then we can reconstitute our relationship, surely not in the same way, but in a stronger way, for both parties can bring more understanding and sensitivity to each other.

Admission, Faith and Trust

I can now consider the role of faith in the process of admission. To acknowledge who one is and to acknowledge how one hurts and to admit to some misjudgment or misdeed are all, in essence, an admission of deep faith. Such becomes the knocking to which the door with no handle might open, the seeking to find the object which may not exist, the asking for something that asks more in the question than any answer one might receive.⁵⁷ Admission about anything important to G!d is an admission of faith in G!d and faith in our relationship with G!d, just as admission of anything of importance to the people in our life is an admission of faith in those people and of faith in the relationship we have forged with them. It is the action of trust that G!d is a G!d who keeps covenant loyalty, loyally (*chesed*).⁵⁸ If we claim that we have nothing to acknowledge and never admit, then we not only deceive (*r'miyah*) ourselves but we make G!d a non-player in our lives, a Being with whom we do not relate fully, honestly or honorably and in whom we have no trust (*botei-ach*).⁵⁹ In this

⁵⁷ Mays, 147.

⁵⁸ V. 10b.

⁵⁹ Mays, 147. See 32:2 (*r'miyah*) and 32:10 (*botei-ach*).

discussion we should note that v. 10 reads

v'ha-botei-ach b'YHVH chesed y'sov'venu
but **those who trust in YHVH—loving kindness** envelops them.

The word *chesed*, “loving kindness,” lies just on the other side of the Deity’s name from *botei-ach*, “trust.” Trust and loving kindness are connected through our connection with the Divine. One cannot truly be the recipient of G!d’s (or any person’s) loving kindness until one first feels a healthy sense of trust, trust in oneself, trust in G!d (and the other person), and trust in the relationship. Without trust one can remain entrenched in fear:⁶⁰

Yom ira ani **eilecha ev-tach...bElohim batlach-ti** lo ira...
BElohim batlach-ti lo ira.
Any day I am fearful, **to You I (turn my) trust...in G!d I trust**
and I do not fear...**In G!d I trust** and I do not fear...

The Psalmist does not state that one who feels trust can never be subject to fear. Everyone feels fear at some points. The Psalmist, however, points out that when one does feel fear that one can still tap into one’s ability to trust. Hopefully one has built up a reservoir of experiences wherein one appropriately trusted and felt good about one’s own self for it. Yet even where one’s trust did not always elicit a positive response by other people, G!d will always respond to a position of earnest trust.

Those who trust do not remain mired in shame. Even when enemies behave abjectly, those who trust do not take on the tremendous potential of emotional (over)load:⁶¹

Elohai—**b'cha vatlach-ti** al ei-vosha; al ya-al-tsu oy-vay li.
My G!d, **in You I trust**—I feel no shame;

⁶⁰ Ps 56:4-5, 12.

⁶¹ Ps 25:2.

my enemies cannot exult over me.

The Psalmist, again, does not state that if one can get to a place of trust that one will not ever do or say embarrassing things or that one will not ever find oneself in an embarrassing situation. With trust, one might still have toxic people in one's life, people who do not—or cannot—nurture us. The psalmist, however, understands that with trust, one need not take on shame or embarrassment and weave it into the kind of person one is or might be, for shame is never who anyone really is.

In striving to find the ability to trust again in G'd, the psalmist looks to, respects, and takes in the model afforded by the legacy of one's past:⁶²

B'cha bat-chu avoteinu, **bat-chu** vat'fal'teimo....**b'cha**
vat-chu v'lo voshu.

In You our ancestors **trusted**; **they trusted** and you rescued them....**in**
You they trusted and did not feel shame.

The Psalmist thus realizes that even when one does feel low—low on trust and low on one's self—that one does have resources: one can look to the stories of one's ancestors (or heritage) and of one's own family, for they do not only inspire but empower. If one feels supported by others, including those who are no longer physically present or available directly, one might still gain trust and strength from when one was together or what one knows of them.

Gaining a sense of trust can help empower oneself toward doing what is good and right, as one knows it internally. Trust can help redirect oneself toward the right path (*derech*), as happened for the psalmist:⁶³

B'tach B'YHVH va-asei tov...gol al YHVH darkecha;

⁶² Ps 22:16.

⁶³ Ps 37:3, 5.

uv-tach alav v'hu ya'ase.

Trust in G'd and do good....Roll your life-path onto YHVH;

trust G'd, and G'd will do it.

Since trust in others, including G'd, is at least a reflection of the trust one places in oneself, the psalmist here suggests that sensing that good things can happen and that one is on the right path is a function of trust. To the degree that one can accomplish this by not giving in to one's worst negative impulses and trying to build up one's confidence in oneself and in life so that one can better trust, one can, like the psalmist, reach days when one trots down one's path feeling not merely healthy but whole:⁶⁴

Shof-teini YHVH ki ani b'tumi halachti; **u-vYHVH batach-ti** lo em-ad.

Judge me now, YHVH, for I, in my wholeness, am now walking;

in YHVH I have trusted—I will not slip.

This is a psalmist who has regained personal bearing, a sense of confidence in oneself, and faith in life once again, and so eagerly awaits any connection that lies ahead, including communication with the Holy One. The prophet Jeremiah communicates just such a picture of possibility:⁶⁵

Baruch ha-gever asher **yiv-tach B'YHVH** v'haya YHVH **miv-tacho**.

V'haya k'eitz shatul al-mayim v'al yuval y'shalach sharashav

v'lo yir-e ki-yavo chom v'haya aleihu ra-anan

u-vish-nat batsoret lo yid'ag v'lo yamish ma-asot peri.

Blessed is the mighty one who **trusts in YHVH** and lets **YHVH become a Source of Trust**. That person shall be like a tree planted by waters, or, by a stream, sends forth its roots. It does not perceive the coming heat, and its leaves remain luxuriant. In a year of drought it does not worry, for it does not stop bearing fruit.

The prophet here links up strength and might not with physical prowess but emotional depth. The mighty person is the one who can trust. People who do so

⁶⁴ Ps 26:1.

⁶⁵ Jer 17:7-8.

are much like the psalmist in the opening psalm, whose language is remarkably similar not merely to Psalm 32, as I previously explored, but to this verse in Jeremiah.⁶⁶ The person who trusts must be well grounded or rooted in who they are as a person, standing tall in life. Such persons seem to get constant renewal from the spiritual waters within so that such a person need not worry about “heat,” “drought,” or “parchedness.” The prophet here knows of such people and calls them *ashrei*, “evolving.” The psalmist, too, knows of such people, as does the author of Prv:

Ashrei adam **botei-ach bach.**
The evolving person **trusts in You.**⁶⁷

Ashrei ha-gever asher sam **YHVH miv-tacho.**
Evolving is the person of strength—who makes **YHVH their Source of Trust.**⁶⁸

Maskil al davar yim-tsa tov; **uvotei-ach bAdonai** ash-rav.
The one who learns a life lesson in a matter finds goodness; **and the one who trusts in YHVH** is deemed evolving.⁶⁹

Coming full circle, one can now understand just how important the Hebrew Bible considers trust, especially in G!d. Trust starts off by reducing fear. Growing confidence leads the person of trust to reduce their sense of shame. Indeed, deepening trust leads one to stop taking on the negativity of others. Growing in trust one can more confidently gain one’s footing once again on one’s life-path. As one gains in trust one no longer feels empty or parched, but well-watered, and constantly renewed, as one faces the challenges of life. Trust can help a person dare to take steps one might otherwise dare not take. These steps teach a

⁶⁶ See above, 160-4.

⁶⁷ Ps 84:13.

⁶⁸ Ps 40:5.

⁶⁹ Prv 16:20.

person new lessons for life, and one can continue to evolve, walking firmly, even proudly, on one's own life-path.

This survey of the Tanakh on trust, especially trust in G!d, teaches that one's ability to trust remains central to relationships, whether with other people or with G!d. Eventually, of course, that trust must flow between any two parties in relationship like *mayim rabim*, "mighty waters."⁷⁰ For this reason the word for trust occurs in the precise middle of the seven words of this verse. It is at the core of all healthy relationships and, thus, a key component in any individual's ability to enter into relationship with anyone or the One.

Faith can ensure that a person not behave like the horse and mule without understanding that can remain static when movement is called for and that moves when taking a time out is necessary.⁷¹ With a healthful faith one understands that one shall not always do things perfectly or even well, and that one might behave in ways that do not make one proud of oneself, but faith also helps one to know that falling down is not the worst thing that can happen to a person. Indeed falling down can sometimes provide a different vantage point to see the road ahead that can be helpful when one gets back on one's *derech*, "life-path."⁷² Therefore what is much worse than falling down is refusing to get up and moving again. Finally, a healthy faith enables the person to get up more quickly and with more purpose and resolve and with greater energy, because one knows that acknowledgment and admission are part of the healthy

⁷⁰ V. 6.

⁷¹ V. 9.

⁷² V. 8.

movement on that *derech*, and that G!d is gracious with the person and therefore, the person can be, too.

Trust and Loving Kindness

I just pointed out the importance of the positioning of the roots for “trust” and “loving kindness” in this verse. This led me to explore the nature of the importance of trust, especially trust in G!d, within Tanakh. I now need to draw out this picture further by noting how “trust” (*batach*) and “loving kindness” (*chesed*) appear together in Tanakh.

The psalmist asks for a display of Divine loving kindness on the basis of the trust that the psalmist places in G!d.⁷³ The psalmist understands this in the context of the need for direction in the psalmist’s life:

Hash-mi-eini va-boker **chas-decha** ki **v’cha vatach-ti**.
 Hodei-eini derech zu eilech ki eilecha nasati naf-shi.
 Tell me in the morning of **Your loving kindness** for in **You I trust**.
 Inform me of the life-path I must walk; for to You I lift up my life.

When the psalmist experiences Divine loving kindness that enables the psalmist to get better direction in life, the psalmist offers to give back by offering the same hope for others. Using the same phrase, the psalmist offers to instruct any in the community *b’derech zu teilech*, on each one’s walking on their own particular life-path.

The psalmist in the immediately preceding psalm hopes for loving kindness because the trust the psalmist has built in G!d has led to a letting go of previous ideas or patterns of behavior that were, in the scheme of things, folly.⁷⁴

Saneiti ha-shom’rim hav-lei shav; va’ani **el YHVH batach-ti**. Agila

⁷³ Ps 143:8.

⁷⁴ Ps 31:7-8.

v'es-m'cha **b'chas-decha** asher ra-ita et on-yi; yadata b'tsarot naf-shi.
I hate those who guard vain follies, and as for me, **to YHVH I trust**. I exult
and I revel in **Your loving kindness** as You saw my lowly state and had
awareness of the pain of my life.

The psalmist who experienced this truly knows what Divine forgiveness is
and what it feels like.⁷⁵

Sham'ra naf-shi ki **chasid** ani. Hosha av-d'cha—ata Elokai—**ha-botei-ach
eilecha**....ki ata Adonai tov v'salach; **v'rav-chesed** l'chol kor'echa.
Guard my life for I am **kind-striving**. Deliver Your servant—You, my G!d—
the one who trusts in You....for You, my Proprietor, are good and
forgiving—and **abounding in loving kindness** to all who call to You.

Here, I detect a hint at the Thirteen Attributes.⁷⁶ Those attributes must be
“called” or “evoked” (*vayikra*, same root as *kor'echa* here) and include the
attribute of *rav chesed ve-emet*, “mighty in loving kindness and truth.” In this
verse, the psalmist does not wish to call attention to truth—the psalmist does not
wish the Deity to dwell upon the truth of the psalmist’s misguided behavior or
wrongful journeying but, rather, the Deity’s capacity for dispensing “goodness,”
“forgiveness,” and “loving kindness” to those who, in addition to whatever
negative facts may appertain, are sincerely trying to move beyond them in a
better direction in their life. The psalmist suggested that the one who trusts in
YHVH will be surrounded with loving kindness.⁷⁷ Here, the psalmist has shaped
the personal plea accordingly: the psalmist who trusts in YHVH is literally
surrounded in this passage by the root for “loving kindness”: *chasid*, *ha-botei-
ach*, *rav-chesed*.

It seems, then, a basic need for humans: the need to develop trust so that

⁷⁵ Ps 86:2, 5.

⁷⁶ Ex 34:6-7. I previously discussed these in relationship to Psalm 32. See above, 180-6.

⁷⁷ Ps 32:10.

one might develop the capacity to take in another's loving kindness. Even the mightiest of humans might need the might of Divine loving kindness:⁷⁸

Ki ha-melech **botei-ach bAdonai uv'chesed Elyon** bal yimot.
For the ruler **trusts in YHVH; and through the loving kindness of the Most High** will not totter.

One can experience this most fully and most freely not when one struggles with trust but after one lives with it. One can then live in joy as one feels Divine loving kindness as more of a constant in one's life, as one finds in the immediately following psalm:⁷⁹

Ki vo yis-mach libeinu ki v'shem kod-sho **vatachnu**.
Y'hi **chas-d'cha YHVH** aleinu ka-asher yichal-nu lach.
For in G'd our hearts rejoice because in G'd's holy Name **we trust**.
May **Your loving kindness, YHVH**, be upon us as we hope for You.

For the person who experiences life in this way, trust and loving kindness remain intimately connected, as their placement in Ps 13:6 suggests:

*Va-ani b'chas-d'cha vatachti yagel libi bishu-atecha ashira lAdonai;
ki gamal alay.*
As for me—in **Your loving kindness I will trust**;
my heart will exult in Your liberation—
I will sing to YHVH, for YHVH has dealt beneficently with me.

Finally, one who strives to live in trust will gain in confidence but retain a humble sense of their place in the world. Such a person can live in public again, amidst the others around them who, too, struggle to live in piety, to find trust, to gain loving kindness.⁸⁰

*Va-ani k'zayit ra-anan b'veit Elohim;
batach-ti v'chesed Elohim olam va-ed.*
I am like a luxuriant olive in G'd's House;

⁷⁸ Ps 21:8.

⁷⁹ Ps 33:21-22.

⁸⁰ Ps 52:10-11.

One should note the exquisite balance of one's proper place in one's world: only an olive but yet in holy space, where each can see one's life luxuriate. This, too, can be our journey—from fear, from shame, from pain, from dry emptiness to growth, to grounding, to renewed vigor, to trust, to honor, to life.

Questions to ponder:

1. Do you agree with this analysis of the importance of the articulation of one's deepest feelings and trust? How do each of these (inter)relate with loving kindness? How does faith fit into this? How would you frame it?
2. How does your analysis translate to your other relationships? If one does not acknowledge one's deep concerns or admit a wrong done to someone significant in our lives, whether a life mate, a family member, friend, neighbor, co-worker, what kind of relationship/covenant does one actually maintain with them? What is one conveying about their place in our lives?
3. How much does/can one truly trust those considered close without confiding in or making admission to them? Is the lack of sharing with important others in one's life a demonstration of anti-*chesed*, of unkindness?
4. We compared v. 10 with v. 7. The former requires "trust," while v. 7 speaks of reliance upon YHVH. Is trust the key to this matter of acknowledgment or admission? Is the solution to the concern of acknowledgment and/or admission located in YHVH's compassion, the psalmist's admission, Divine judgment, the covenantal relationship, in trust or in something else?⁸¹ Do you trust G'd? Do you think G'd trusts you?

⁸¹ See Bullock, 143.

5. We have spoken a lot about the character and qualities of the person who needs to and eventually does offer verbal admission. What, however, does the psalm state about G!d? The G!d who wrought great deliverances for Israel also demonstrates great mercy and goodness to the psalmist. What does this show about G!d's character?

The Closing Call to Rejoice:

A Motivational Chant (V.11)

Ending the psalm with a call for rejoicing,⁸² the psalmist seems to feel that the psalmist's own words have had their intended effect. Alternatively, since the psalmist is in a state of rejoicing, the offering of a call to rejoice is another means of asking others to take up the journey, for the ability to allow oneself to be vulnerable through acknowledgment of self to others, although hard, ends up with rejoicing. Only those who take up and go through the journey can truly shout for joy, can truly respond, "Halleluyah," which appropriately is not appended here, for the psalmist does not know if the community member—or the reader—will take up this journey, and only those who do so can truly and fully "shout for joy."

The root of the verb "to let jump in joy" appeared previously in verse 7 as a noun, "euphoric refrains." The psalmist (or, perhaps, the editor, if the final verse is not original to this psalm, as some opine) can invite others to sing "euphoric refrains" because G!d has already "enveloped" the psalmist with "euphoric refrains of deliverance."⁸³ When others indeed join in, then the effect will be, as Allen puts it, a "boost in the volume of praise."⁸⁴ But it is more: if more people

⁸² See Miller, "The Psalms," 259, who calls attention to Ps 31:23-24.

⁸³ McCann, 806.

make admission and do *teshuvah*, then the psalmist will have done something to make amends to the injured party, in this case G!d, that words of admission by themselves do not provide.

To understand fully this point, I shall need to elaborate. Following up one's words with an action is a hallmark of Jewish ritual tradition. When one recites a blessing for the Chanukah lights, one follows this by actually lighting the candles. When one recites a blessing over wine or bread, then one follows the recitation by sipping some wine or tasting the bread. Even the exceptions prove the rule. For example, on the Sabbath lighting a fire is forbidden. One ushers in the Sabbath into the home, however, through the blessing of the candles, after which the lighting of fire then becomes strictly forbidden.⁸⁴ In this case, one lights the candles first and then blesses. However, in order to retain the greater principle that words must be accompanied by action, one covers one's eyes while blessing the Sabbath candles, so that immediately following the blessing, one opens one's eyes and sees the candles that were just blessed, taking in their physical and spiritual radiance. In this way, one makes use of the candles one has just blessed, thereby ensuring that one's words retain integrity by accompanying them with action. Our words must be matched by our action.

In the Jewish notion of *teshuvah*, "rectification," one cannot merely acknowledge one's hurtful action, one's wrongdoing, and leave it at that. Rather, one must do any reasonable action to try to rectify the damage that the injured

⁸⁴ Allen, 50, in relation to Ps 22:23, 24.

⁸⁵ Note *lo t'va-arv eish...b'yom ha-Shabbat*, "Do not light a fire...on the Sabbath day," Ex 35:3.

one must do any reasonable action to try to rectify the damage that the injured party may request. Thus, if one told an employer a mistruth about a co-worker, even unknowingly, then certainly one needs to make admission to the co-worker. As part of that conversation, the co-worker may well ask that the wrongdoer go to the employer, admit to the misdeed, request to have such wrongful information removed from the co-worker's personnel file, and try to make right the relationship between the employer and the co-worker.

Here, too, the psalmist takes one of the few actions one can do to demonstrate that one's words to the Holy One were not mere words, and the psalmist does so publicly. Indeed, the action demonstrates that the uttered words mediated the change of the contrite one's inner landscape. One's actions in the future will be different because one has learned a "life lesson," a *maskil*. Even where no immediate action is asked or is possible to rectify one's misdeed—let alone when there is—Jewish tradition goes even further: one's process of rectification, inside and out, is deemed fully sincere and complete, *teshuvah sh'leimah*, only when one encounters a similar circumstance in the future and no longer takes the wayward path that one took in this instance. Rather, one is back on the proper life-path, one's *derech*. The psalmist here does follow words with action, for the psalmist acknowledges in v.5 and now encourages others to get right with G!d.

Excursus 7: Psalms 32, 33, and 97, and Yom Kippur:

The Exemplary and the Upright

This final verse of Psalm 32 shares verbal links, as well as theme, with the

(“exemplary ones”), *yish-rei* (“equanimous (ones)”), and *harninu* (“jump in joy”), in addition to the name of the Deity (YHVH), all have correspondence with words in 33:1. This suggests not only that the placement of the two psalms was done carefully, but that we should see the two psalms in relationship.⁸⁷ Space does not permit me to explore that relationship fully here, but I noted above⁸⁸ that it, too, includes a verse with *ashrei* that places the “evolved person” as one whose life is tethered to the larger community.⁸⁹ Private admission and private forgiveness is never a matter only between two individuals or between a person and G!d in this view. For when one understands how interconnected all life is, one understands as well that all actions have cosmic repercussions.

What interests me is the use of *tsaddikim*, often translated as “righteous,” but which I have translated as “exemplary.” The English of “righteous” connotes one whose life is characterized by morality or uprightness. The Hebrew, however, does not intend merely, or even primarily, attention to ethical norms. Popularly, people consider righteousness something to which only a few select people can attain, for conventionally the gap between “righteous” and “perfect” seems small. Our psalmist, however, offers this possibility to all in the community as part of this encouragement. G!d may well be *tsaddik b’chol d’rachav*, “exemplary in all ways,”⁹⁰ but humans by definition are not and cannot be. Yet it is clear, then, that the Hebrew Bible intends that people can reach a

⁸⁷ Berlin and Brettler, 1316.

⁸⁸ See above, 23.

⁸⁹ Ps 33:12.

⁹⁰ Ps 145:17.

high degree of *tsid-kut*, “exemplariness,” without reaching perfection.

The psalmist, then, must have something more quotidian in mind. The Hebrew seems to intend someone who behaves with integrity, not perfection, in any and every relationship within which one finds oneself. We live our lives in relationship—with family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors, casual acquaintances, as parts of various communities, the world, the planet, and with G!d. One may be considered *tsaddikim* to the degree that one’s actions match one’s aspirations within these relationships.⁹¹ The word is significant in Psalm 32 because the Psalmist was not in right relationship with G!d, and perhaps others, and is now getting back on the right *derech*, life-path, to live with integrity and wholeness, to live with joy in who one is and who one might yet become. Such a person can truly “revel in YHVH” and “jump in joy,” for that person is “exemplary,” living up to the example within and serving as an example to others. Indeed anything we do might serve as an “example” or model for someone else, either positively or otherwise. It is not that one does not err, but how one handles oneself when one does and how one becomes a positive exemplar to others in their journeys, that earns one the appellation *tsaddik*, “exemplary.” The psalmist urges even the exemplary in the community to take up the challenge, even if they have done so previously, for the life-work of growing is never finished.

We need to further consider that the Jew recites this verse on Shabbat Shuvah or, especially, on Yom Kippur morning. The evening before Yom Kippur is inaugurated with Kol Nidre, named after the central release of vows to G!d that one could not fulfill during the past year (Sephardic tradition) or that one might

⁹¹ See A. A. Anderson, 62-63.

make but finds oneself unable to fulfill during the coming year (Ashkenazic tradition). In the former case, one hopes to live in right relationship with G'd before one move on into a New Year (which, if you recall, begins with the Ten Days of Penitence that culminate in Yom Kippur, the Day of Expiation). In the latter case, one declares that one will strive to do nothing in the coming year to upset the relationship one has grown into with YHVH up to this point. As for relationships with people, one cannot enter Yom Kippur services until one has sought rectification and reconciliation in every case.⁹² No wonder that Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. It not only contains such weighty and profound themes as admission, rectification, forgiveness, and reconciliation, but remains the one day we hope that we live in a holy state, for if we have been doing our growth work, our *teshuvah*, we are—at least on this one day—right in all our relationships.

With this background I consider yet a further intertext for the Jewish community, as Jews traditionally inaugurate Kol Nidre and thus Yom Kippur with a single verse, Ps 97:11:

Or zaru'a la-tsaddik, u-l'yish-rei lev simchah.
Let light be sown for the exemplary, and, for the equanimous, joy.

In this verse, I note the same language as in the consecutive verses of Ps 32:11 and 33:1, including the last four words of this six-word verse: *tsaddik, yish-rei, lev* and *simchah*. This is a remarkable correspondence.

Exemplary people do *ma'asim tovim*, good deeds, attempt to conduct their relationships in appropriate and honorable ways, and strive to continually better

⁹² Mishnah, *Yoma* 8:9.

relationships in appropriate and honorable ways and strive to continually better and refine themselves. Yet they do not necessarily take in the joy of life and, in fact, may sometimes be quite self-critical or otherwise live feeling miserable and full of anguish. Thus our psalmist before admission may well have done many good deeds but because the psalmist had so much inside that remained unaddressed, the psalmist continued to deteriorate spiritually which affected even his physical health deleteriously. Nonetheless the *tsaddikim* benefit from the growing spiritual light, the *or zaru-a*, of all the good they do.

On the other hand, the *yish-rei lev*, the “equanimous of heart,” are those whose hearts are “equal” to or match not only their deeds but their “hearts,” and remain steady with and within themselves on their *derech* (“life-path”) and in their relationships with others and with G'd. They retain their faith, even when the events of life seem counterintuitive to deep faith. Our psalmist knows this all too well. Whatever experience the psalmist has gone through, even if the psalmist bears some major share of responsibility, it has left the psalmist depleted of emotional vitality and spiritual vigor. But for the truly “equanimous of heart” these life difficulties do not shake the constant joy—the *simchah*—of living with an abiding sense of the gift of life, the joy that the psalmist is, in fact, encouraging all to attain. They live in trust, drawing from the deep wellspring of *chesed*, “loving kindness,” they have experienced and taken in from the Holy One and others and now bearing it.

Almost no one can reach the level where they are both always exemplary and always equanimous, where one both does good deeds in response to life's

everyone can grow to great heights in one, if not both, of these two areas. When this verse is recited on Shabbat Shuvah in advance of Yom Kippur, it serves as a channeling of the psalmist's personal encouragement from centuries ago, echoing in one's heart as if the universe calls the person toward fuller, richer, more honorable and thus more joyful living. When this verse is recited on Yom Kippur morning, it assures the worshiper that one has already been re-tracked on one's *derech*, one's "life-path" and, therefore, if one maintains one's relationship with the universe, with G'd, with life, and with all people, one will (continue to) find a deep joy and will have attained the appellation of *ashrei*—one has grown, and one is yet evolving.

In the context of Yom Kippur and the High Holy Days, I consider yet another intertext from the liturgy. Inserted into the Amidah, the central prayer of every Jewish worship service, are three paragraphs that each begin with the word *u-v'chen*, "and therefore." The first paragraph asks that G'd help all people to extend themselves to live together not merely in peace but in relationship. The second paragraph asks that G'd grant honor to the Jewish people and praise, hope and opportunities for all spiritual seekers. For Jews, then, the idea of universal fellowship and spiritual (and political) localism or particularism go hand in hand. True faith cannot be imposed or assumed. That the spiritual impulse has found many forms of expression worldwide suggests a sociological construction to religiosity and spirituality. The last of these three paragraphs begins:

*U-v'chen tsaddikim yir'u v'yis-machu,
visharim ya-alozu, va-chasidim b'rinah yagilu.*

And, therefore, the exemplary will see and revel; the equanimous will be

jubilant and the kindness-striving will, with euphoric cries, exult.

We find five of the words of this line from the liturgy containing the same roots as five of the words in our verse (v.11). This final paragraph looks forward to the time when the exemplary, the equanimous and the kindness-striving people will all celebrate life. What unites them, in this vision, is not singularity of religion but space to continue to forge one's life-path free of the impediments that some structures—including political and religious ones—do impose. This hope comes as the culmination of the first two: it comes after the term "And therefore" has been evoked three times. The flow of this series of prayers is that each person will see themselves in relationship with every other person. In doing so they might recognize the Divine Image in others and grant them the honor that each person and all peoples therefore deserve. When those first two planks, with Divine help, are largely accomplished, then every person can evolve more assuredly, and the universe will itself become a place that promotes the social weal, spiritual depth, and ethical concern. That is why seemingly no other people will exist in that time except for the exemplary, equanimous and the kindness-seeking.⁹³ Yet this third paragraph does not ask the Deity to make this happen.

Indeed, G!d is not mentioned at all. Apparently ushering in and sustaining this vision is, at least in great part, a human endeavor. As Sheila Peltz Weinberg comments, in this paragraph "we envision our future and the great happiness that will accompany our waking up to who we really are."⁹⁴ With each person's

⁹³ Somewhat similar to my understanding of these three types of people, Arzt, without analysis, sees them as the socially responsible, those with integrity and those who are spiritually dedicated. See Max Arzt, *Justice and Mercy: Commentary on the Liturgy of the New Year and the Day of Atonement* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 102.

attention to spiritual direction and each community supporting all of its constituents in this holy endeavor, and with all peoples so engaging other peoples, transformation is achievable. That this prayer is recited on Yom Kippur tells us the power of expiation and reconciliation. Yet this prayer was written for and still recited on Rosh HaShanah, the New Year,⁹⁵ to remind us that this time need not be far off and therefore illusory but is so, so near, within our grasp, our own effort, doable this year. We only need to begin.

⁹⁴ David A. Teutsch, ed., *Kol Haneshamah [Every Soul]: Prayerbook for the Days of Awe* (Elkins Park, PA: Reconstructionist Press, 1999), 364.

⁹⁵ Hammer, 148.

Chapter Six: The Psalmist's Journey Is Everyone's Journey:

Specific Applications

My reading of the psalm suggests that we possess an innate force that is our voice. One of the most powerful human instincts is our ability for self-reflection and self-awareness. When we find the courage to engage with(in) ourselves, to find our voice and publicly articulate it, we honor ourselves and our relationships, and the Divine. The process from self-discovery to disclosure of self to others and to G'd gives us dignity and enables others to see us and call us *ashrei*, "evolving," which in the Hebrew Bible is a title of majesty to which any and every human being can aspire and achieve through assiduous attention to one's emotional life and spiritual direction. In this sense, the drama of the psalm gets reenacted over and over in every true healing story we read, hear of or otherwise witness or experience, events of cosmic magnitude that happen each and every day.

I have tried to suggest, then, that the journey of the psalmist is the journey of each of us. I have suggested that the psalmist's journey could be read in two ways. The traditional understanding is that the psalmist did something wrong, for which an admission is necessary. An equally plausible scenario is that the psalmist has something deep within that the psalmist wishes to share.

In this section, I offer an example of each. For the former possibility, I suggest the journey of the one addicted to controlled substances. The addict has hurt the self from the moment the addict chose the wayward path of using a baneful substance. The addict may indeed commit acts that hurt others in

attempting to maintain the addiction and, simultaneously, the appearance that everything is fine. The addict may, for example, steal money needed to purchase more of the addictive substance. Attention to maintaining the addiction often overrides concern of maintaining and nurturing one's relationships.

The second application offers the second possibility, where the psalmist has not committed any wrong against anyone but, rather, holds something very important to share with all others in one's life but refrains from doing so. The case of the gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered person (GLBT) represents this possibility well. From a scientific perspective the fact of one's sexual orientation and gender identity is constitutional, part of who a person is. From the perspective of the Hebrew Bible, however, these facts are built into the universe by a caring G!d and constitute part of what it means to be created in the Divine Image.¹ If so, living fully with such realization remains an essential part of one's life-journey, for G!d does not create in vain. Nonetheless, many communities, even those attuned to Scripture, maintain a sociocultural construction of community that privileges a heterosexual orientation and a gender identity that matches one's biology, over others. Any differences in either are disdained, often built into the legal structure. As such the GLBT often finds it difficult to find support in such a community, even from one's family of origin. It can be quite intimidating, especially for a young person, to try to find one's way on one's path in such a milieu.

What the addict and the GLBT person do have in common is the need to

¹ J. B. Sacks, "The Divine Image and Sexual Orientation," Claremont School of Theology, May 2003.

overcome shame. In the addict's case the shame may have come because of a series of acts for which the addict should rightly feel some guilt. In the case of the GLBT person, the shame comes in the complete absence of any act for which one should feel guilt; rather, it comes from one's sociocultural environment. Addicts and some discovering a minority sexual orientation or gender identity have low self-esteem which can lead them to cope with their situation in negative ways. The addict may stray from a positive path by acting in ways that cause other people to shun him or her and so isolate physically and avoid regaining positive control of one's life. The GLBT person may stray by acting in ways that cause other people to think they are part of the majority, to think they are heterosexual. Although surrounded by others, they isolate emotionally and so avoid gaining positive control of their life. In order to live more fully, productively and joyfully, both the addict and the GLBT person will need to confront a sense of shame and learn to live with integrity—without *r'miyah*. The journey for both will necessarily be the journey of the psalmist—coming to awareness, growing to where one can articulate honestly to G!d and to others one's reality, re-enter one's various communities, ready to share one's journey, mentor others and find oneself emotionally ready to live in joy.²

First Application: The Psalmist and the Addict

One place where Psalm 32 and the modern world converge is in the Twelve-Step group meeting, where, in every meeting, attendees re-enact the

² For more on the addict, see Nakken, *The Addictive Personality* 65, 96-101 and Twerski, *Addictive Thinking*, 67-70, 87-89, 2.65. On the GLBT person, see, among others, Richard Isay, *Being Homosexual: Gay Men and Their Development*, rev. and updated (New York: Vintage Books, 2009); and *Becoming Gay: The Journey to Self-Acceptance*, rev. and updated (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

phenomenon of public disclosure in community that we have seen in our psalmist, where attendees assume the role of psalmist, community member, or both.

The Twelve Steps themselves serve as a set of guiding principles that promote a course of action for the one evincing such behavioral problems as addiction and compulsion. These were originally proposed as a method for recovery from alcoholism in 1939 by Alcoholics Anonymous, known as AA. Since then over 200 such organizations, known as fellowships, have adapted this method and now claim millions of members worldwide. Drug addicts who did not relate to the specifics of alcohol dependency, for example, formed Narcotics Anonymous. Those wishing to meet with those using a specific drug have formed such fellowships as Marijuana Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous and Crystal Meth Anonymous. Individuals address specific behavioral issues in such fellowships as Gamblers Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Clutterers Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, Sexual Compulsives Anonymous, and Workaholics Anonymous. Auxiliary groups such as Al-Anon and Nar-Anon have been created for friends and family members of alcoholics and addicts, respectively, as part of the response to treating such behaviors as a larger complex that is enabled and even furthered by family systems. Thus these group meetings, occurring worldwide everyday, have tremendous power for those who attend.

In order to better see how the journey of the psalmist correlates or even converges with that of the member of a Twelve Step fellowship, I cite (adapting

gender-specific language) “The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous”.³

1. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of G!d as we understood Deity.

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5. Admitted to G!d, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6. Were entirely ready to have G!d remove all these defects of character.

7. Humbly asked G!d to remove our shortcomings.

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with G!d as we understood Deity, praying only for knowledge of the Divine Will for us and the power to carry that out.

12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried

³ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981), 21-25, *passim*.

to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Here the alcoholic, like our psalmist, had been previously living without awareness of past wrong conduct or how such conduct had hurt the self, other people, and G!d. Awareness that one is indeed suffering and that it is due to a real problem is the first step. In the second step the person gains greater clarity that the nature of one's suffering is primarily spiritual. In the third step, the person decides to do something productive that gets to the core of the matter by aligning one's life-path with the Divine will. The spiritual direction then encompasses a searing self-examination (step 4) which leads the person to a verbal articulation of one's admission to G!d and others (step 5). Ongoing emotional and psychological work (steps 6 and 7) lead the person to understand the larger ramifications of any misdeeds one has made (step 8), to try to rectify any wrongs, and to repair and reclaim, if possible, all relationships (step 9). As the person continues one's journey—now back on one's life-path (*derech*)—one demonstrates that one has taken in the life-lesson (*maskil*)—by not repeating the particular wrong in a similar situation and when committing some other misdeed, quickly taking care of it (step 10). That will lead to an awareness by others and oneself that one is indeed evolving (*ashrei*) or growing as a person (step 11). This leads one to take the *maskil* to one's community (step 12). Apparently the model of working on oneself within a Twelve-Step fellowship will translate or otherwise support and help when the individual turns or returns, even daily, to the other communities within which one lives one's life. The journey of the Twelve

Steps is the journey of the psalmist. It is a lifelong journey that honors self, Gld, others—indeed, life.⁴

Second Application: The Psalmist and the Coming Out Process for GLBT persons

The term “coming out of the closet,” or simply “coming out,” commonly connotes the process whereby people become aware of and claim ownership of their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, or gender identity as a transgendered person. This process includes the acknowledgment of one’s new and growing sense of self to others, including family, friends, coworkers, and fellow members of one’s faith community. Each disclosure to another person and each new understanding about oneself in relationship to this discovery may each be considered a further “coming out.”

Coming out may be described and experienced as a psychological process or journey, that includes decision-making or risk-taking, strategizing or planning and a means toward feeling gay pride and not shame or social stigma. Although today more lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are out than ever before, coming out remains a challenge for the majority of the world’s GLBT population not only on an individual psychological level but also for the possible negative social and legal consequences, or even dangers, that a person’s coming out can trigger in some individuals and in many groups, organizations and communities.

Perhaps the most widely accepted model used to describe the coming out

⁴ Milgrom makes a somewhat different analogy to the Twelve Steps. See Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, 374-76, and Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, 58-60.

process has been the one established by Vivienne Cass, commonly known as Cass identity model.⁵ This model outlines six discrete stages that individuals who successfully come out go through. These include:

identity confusion. A person experiences identity confusion when something that prompts them to question their sexual orientation, often due to some first, or new, awareness of different thoughts, feelings, and attractions. Many feel confusion and may experience turmoil. The range of response to these questions and feelings include denial, avoidance of more input or information about sexual orientation, and inhibition of behavior.

identity comparison. During the stage of identity comparison a person may consider a GLBT identity and its wider implication for the self. Many in this stage isolate, grieve for perceived losses should they continue to explore their sexual orientation, may justify their feelings without embracing them, or compartmentalize any behavior they have or may contemplate engaging in from their perception of their own identity.

identity tolerance. During identity tolerance the individual acknowledges that they may have a minority sexual orientation. Here the person starts to explore and incorporate a new vocabulary to converse more healthfully about one's sexual orientation, more clearly notice differences between one's self and the perceived heterosexual "norm," and seek out a GLBT sociocultural milieu,

⁵ Vivienne C. Cass, "Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model," *Journal Of Homosexuality* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1979). Discussed in Jen Anderson and Mario Brown, "Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation," http://www.drury.edu/multinl/mnlprint_new.cfm?ID=13258&NLID=152 (accessed Sept. 5, 2009).

which may include testing out some perceived GLBT stereotypical roles.

identity acceptance. With identity acceptance a person begins to see their growing sexual orientation in a more positive light, accepting and not merely tolerating it. With more contact with GLBT communities, the person may attempt to bridge one's budding personal identity with that of one's heretofore constructed public persona. This bridging usually includes attempts to disclose one's growing sense of sexual identity to others as well as more social coming out.

identity pride. With identity pride the individual tends to let more and more people know one's internal "real" self, understood foremost through the prism of sexual orientation. The person may see a GLBT community as their primary source of support. This person continues to grow in learning how to deal with the range of reactions to the self-disclosure and starts to see and sort out one's anger and defensiveness.

identity synthesis. With identity synthesis the person integrates their more solid sense of sexual identity with all other aspects of the self, such that one's sexual orientation becomes only one aspect of one's personhood. One here reacts to heterosexism less intensely and starts to rebuild trust in others.

The Cass Identity Model may best be considered not a linear model but a dynamic one, where an individual will not necessarily "graduate" from one stage to the next more "positive" stage, but may experience different stages at different times in one's life. Indeed, one could experience more than one stage at any given time. Finally, some may not experience all stages.

This more dynamic appropriation of the model allows us to see coming out as a gradual process and, indeed, a journey. One usually comes out somewhat gradually at first only to those with whom one has the most trust, such as a close friend or family member. Every person's situation differs from all others. Some people are out at work but not to their families, or vice-versa. Thus, one does not typically "come out" once and for all; rather, one continues to decide what to share and how to share with each person, known or not, and in most new situations. As one grows in understanding of GLBT culture and in one's own understanding of who one is becoming, one often discovers deeper levels of coming out, so that one may come out to the same individual more than once.

At some point in one's journey, one "comes out to oneself," meaning the person acknowledges to oneself that one is gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. This is the critical step in the coming-out process; it often involves soul-searching. Coming out to oneself, too, may be more of a process than a single moment decision. It remains the path on the journey that signals the beginning of the end of a time of ambiguity and thus begins the process of self-acceptance. The journey of Western society in understanding and embracing the varieties of sexual response has been slow, including within the United States. Where communities do demonstrate more acceptance and embrace, those who perceive themselves as different from the "norm" come out at younger ages. Others may not come out at all.

The journey of the GLBT person, then, is the journey of the psalmist. Indeed the GLBT person in most sociocultural locations today undertakes this

very journey over and over throughout life. An act or episode may touch off some deeper thinking about oneself, in this case's one's sexual orientation or gender identity. One can experience confusion and inner turmoil in trying to sort out one's "truth." During the process, one may repress feelings, deny them, compartmentalize them, rationalize them, or engage in other forms of *r'miyah*. One may remain "silent" until one can reframe who one is and may become and grow to like what one perceives. There may be disclosures in individual as well as public forums. Within one's family of origin, for example, one may tell one's parents privately, but then bring a date to a family function where many have not been told. One constantly gains from the reactions within the various settings, private and communal, and from one's constantly going back to learn more and find out more. When one reaches some point of synthesis along the way, one may well celebrate in any number of ways and publicly encourage others to go through a similar process to claim their true identity. The act of acknowledgment is equally decisive for both the psalmist and the GLBT person to continue their journey healthfully along their *derech* ("life-path") and experience *chesed* ("loving kindness") all along the way.

Chapter 7: The Psalm/ist and Community

Communal Use of the Psalm

Since many psalms read as if they are very personal expressions of private experience, one does well to remember that the context of the use of psalms is often communal. In Psalm 32, even the “personal” sections seem designed for an audience of the faithful. The admission, albeit personal, is made publicly. Even today, the primary place where a Jew makes such admission is at one’s synagogue in the context of one’s community. A liturgical setting for this psalm may further be implied by its changes of address as well as by its concluding call to praise, a call addressed to the community with a plural imperative.¹ This may well indicate that in its liturgical use in the Temple, different voices read different parts or lines.

Thus many scholars locate the *Sitz im Leben*, the “life-setting” of the Psalm, within the ritual life of the Jerusalem Temple.² Mowinckel proposes that such acknowledgment or admission would have been made at an annual Enthronement Festival of YHWH, perhaps accompanied by the recitation of Psalm 131.³ The lack of reference to sacrifices might even suggest this psalm was used more for synagogue worship practices than any ritual within the Jerusalem Temple, whether connected to such an annual gathering or not. Mays thus argues for the lateness of this psalm, citing a time when “the pedagogical role of worship became more significant.”⁴ McCann reports that most scholars

¹ Broyles, 161.

² See, for example, A. A. Anderson, 254.

³ Mowinckel, 1:186.

⁴ Mays, 145.

do associate the psalm's origin and use with the later, post-exilic synagogue, rather than with Solomon's Temple.⁵ In this, I note, with Mays, the concern for such prayer in Daniel 9, Ezra 9, and Nehemiah 9, all late texts.

In this psalm, then, the physical is the spiritual, the individual is the communal, and the personal is the political. Recited communally, the psalmist's deliverance becomes not merely a possibility for each one who hears or reads this psalm, but a microcosm of greater deliverance for the community and even the world. This is the hope for which we yearn, the possibility to which we commit ourselves. As Mays puts it, "the psalmist is a paradigmatic figure whose example incorporates and expresses Israel's experience of G'd's way."⁶ We should, then, also ponder how forgiveness is needed to not only put our own individual lives back together but, further, on how we need forgiveness to put our communities back together.

In reciting vv. 3-5 in communal context, I better feel and understand how racism, sexism, homophobia and ethnic warfare are all symptomatic of unjustly structured relationships that mark every individual, family, and community. The anguish of the psalmist is an appropriate response to the wrongs that mar our world. Inequitable power relationships, whether in the home, the Synagogue, or the world, are indeed malevolent and call for remorse.

However, remorse by itself can constitute, as the psalmist knows too well, an introverting and destructive force. Remorse alone is not sufficient to produce change in either self or society. As the psalmist realizes, penitence needs to be

⁵ MCann, 805.

⁶ Mays, 146.

balanced by and with forgiveness. This forgiveness is not some passive quality that forgets malevolent deeds committed and permits people to continue to ruin themselves or retain a destructive hold over others. Forgiveness in the biblical conception as exemplified by this psalm is an active, transformative agent, namely the power of G'd that works to overcome fractured relationships. This more dynamic view permits a person to rise out of remorse to seek substantive changes in oneself and in the world, and to see in those changes the reality of Divine forgiveness. *Teshuvah* is not merely an inner change, some inner "rectification"—but, rather, one accompanied by outer changes—an outer "rectification," in this case actions that arise as a consequence of all of one's activity back toward spiritual health and one's life-path. Moreover, these actions arising out of consequence also become actions of consequence, actions which not only demonstrate one's changed spiritual landscape but forge increasingly deep, evolving relationships. All can be *ashrei*, and that is our goal, our hope, our dignity.

The Psalmist's program

The program that the Psalmist seems to hold, then, is for the listener and fellow congregant not merely to silently envy the psalmist's good fortune, but, rather, to become active participants by turning their own hearts to G'd so that they can become *yish-rei lev*, "equanimous of heart." The Psalmist thus witnesses to what G'd has done and, therefore, can do likewise for all. *Or zaru-a la-tsaddik u-l'yish-rei lev simchah*. "Light is sown for the exemplary, joy for the

equanimous.”⁷

Many of us can recognize this process of this psalm:

- We have gone to doctor after doctor before realizing that the source of our pain is not primarily physical but largely due to emotional or psycho-spiritual causes.
- We have become addicted, whether to alcohol, drugs, sex, overeating or something else. Our recovery started in no small measure from us confronting our addiction and then taking the step of acknowledging our addictive behavior to another person and to G!d, which begins to release us from the paralyzing grip of shame.
- We have cheated on taxes, our life companions, our parents, our children, our employers, our employees, our colleagues, and countless others through acts of commission or omission, through words spoken or left unspoken.
- We are members of a minority group, and the majority does not understand us, either ignoring our reality or reacting negatively toward it.
- We have a secret we long to share, so that the important others in our life might support us and hold us, but we feel unworthy of their support or fear their rejection.

What we in our society have often relegated to the privacy of therapists’ offices or the anonymity of Twelve Step meetings rooms, often in churches (and not synagogues), happened in a ritual context in ancient Israel.⁸ This is evidenced by this psalm, with its “repertory of speech acts,” such as admission,

⁷ Ps 97:11.

⁸ Levine, 100.

exhortation, and praise. This made available to the ordinary individual “a vocabulary of inner states and a set of postures to adopt” when visiting the ultimate Therapist, the One who “heals...broken hearts.”⁹

The “instruction” of the opening and closes verses of the psalm does not constitute the psalm’s core, which I located in the transformational actions of the psalmist described in the middle block of material. Whatever the psalmist’s subsequent joy, the psalm ultimately knows that transformation has its costs: vulnerability, yielding, honesty, clarity, admission—and the lack of certainty of the response that anyone might give, including the One. One senses that transformation’s costs are great and mighty, and the uncertainty of what the possibility of change might bring can feel frightening, even terrifying, for some, leaving the individual emotionally and spiritually paralyzed. Otherwise, we might long since have engaged in it—and done so with more regularity and devotion. Yet the psalm also knows that whatever the psalmist’s sufferings, spiritual directioning brings great gifts to our lives. It’s “worth is far beyond rubies.”¹⁰ This psalm “illustrates powerfully that the prerequisite of spiritual health” is “a self-conscious awareness.”¹¹ The gift of this psalm is not merely to remind us that we can become so much more, but to encourage us to do so, beginning now. So much rides on our response. And it all depends on us—and each other.

⁹ Ps 147:3.

¹⁰ Prv 31:10.

¹¹ Craigie, 268.

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